School of Theology at Claremont
1001 1421834

MEN OF
Liberty

LIBRARY

Southern California
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
Claremont, California

From the library of
Lloyd E. Smith

MEN OF LIBERTY

"The World Belongs to the Living."
— Thomas Jefferson

Men of Liberty

TEN UNITARIAN PIONEERS

By

STEPHEN HOLE FRITCHMAN

BX
9867
F7

With Illustrations by

HENDRIK WILLEM VAN LOON

BOSTON
The Beacon Press
1945

By STEPHEN H. FRITCHMAN

Young People in the Liberal Church

Prayers of the Free Spirit

Copyright, 1944
THE AMERICAN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION

Second Printing, July, 1944

SECOND PRINTING, NOVEMBER, 1945

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Copyright in Canada

18

CONTENTS

PAGES

INTRODUCTION vii

CHAPTERS

I. Michael Servetus 3
b. Villanueva, Spain (1511–1553)

II. Faustus Socinus 17
b. Siena, Italy (1539-1604)

III. Francis David 31
b. Kolozsvar, Hungary (1510-1579)

IV. John Biddle 47
b. Wotton-under-Edge, Gloucestershire, England (1615-1662)

V. Joseph Priestley 63
b. Leeds, England (1733-1804)

VI. Thomas Jefferson 83
b. Shadwell, Virginia (1743-1826)

VII. William Ellery Channing 105
b. Newport, Rhode Island (1780-1842)

VIII. Ralph Waldo Emerson 127
b. Boston, Massachusetts (1803-1882)

IX. Theodore Parker 145
b. Lexington, Massachusetts (1810-1860)

X. Magnus Eiriksson 163
b. Iceland (1806-1881)

332755

ILLUSTRATIONS

PAGES

The world belongs to the living . . . *Frontispiece*

Servetus meets his fate 2

Calvin's law triumphed 11

The burning of the books 16

Francis David disappeared in a castle and died . 30

John Biddle's workshop 46

The mob hangs Priestley in effigy 62

Priestley and Unitarianism sail for America . 75

Thomas Jefferson 82

Channing brought religion back whence it had come 104

Emerson's New England 126

Unitarians risked life and limb 144

From the lonely fields of Iceland 162

INTRODUCTION

In the dim past of Norwegian religion we are told one phrase appears again and again: "For man is man's delight." The study of many books on Unitarian history during the past few years has convinced the writer of the profound truth of that simple sentence. One finds himself as excited over the courageous act of Hieronymus Bolsec, leaping to his feet in a church in Switzerland four centuries ago and protesting the sermon of John Calvin, as though it were a deed of heroism at Salerno in 1943. Whether in battle today or four hundred years ago, audacity for a great principle stirs the blood and makes us walk more proudly, "for man is man's delight."

This book is little more than some footnotes on Unitarian biography, footnotes printed in large type and set up higher on the page since few of us read footnotes, I am told. (Personally I learned years ago that footnotes are often the most salty part of a book, and contain the author's choicest morsels.)

One or two things ought to be stated to guide those who may choose to read this book. We shall not attempt to say all that might be said about any of these great figures in our liberal tradition. The writer has exercised a severe censorship against long arguments about religious doctrines, even though those arguments often were extremely important. This book is what our Catholic friends call "hagiology," a study of the saints. Only the most important ideas these men sponsored are mentioned. Otherwise this book would have been so heavy no one would ever have picked it up in a day of paper-covered pocket detective stories.

Also it should be noted that the word *Unitarian* is used in a broad sense, not a strict one. Those men who stood for the essential unity of God, for religious freedom of mind and conscience, and stressed the leadership of Jesus as prophet and teacher, are included in our Unitarian family. Frankly, this little book is intended to honor pioneers in religious freedom rather than to stake out claims to certain men as members of our church. There are Unitarian Mohammedans, according to Dr. J. Estlin Carpenter, and there are many others of the Jewish and Buddhist faiths who feel a kinship with the Unitarian ideal. This is all on the asset side of the ledger. While we shall consider only Christian Unitarians, our concern is to see men break the shackles of creed-thinking, the bonds of dogmatism anywhere — to learn instead the glory of independent thinking, of discovering growing ideas about God and man, about the nature of the universe and human society.

Some of the men selected were marked by human imperfections which should save us from any temptation to be smug or complacent. Servetus, for example, was conceited and arrogant, as well as brave and adventurous. We still have far to go in achieving humility and knowledge. Our aim is to find some of the patterns of liberalism in religion, patterns expressed in the lives of actual men who realized their ideal of being progressive and devout. If we are to be skillful today as free men and women, it is well to know "the pit from which we were digged," that is, to be basically educated about the founders of Unitarianism. Most important of all, this book is to remind us that honest religion never comes cheaply or easily. It seems always to be threatened with extinction.

Finally, these pages are intended to help us discover the great richness and variety of spiritual experience included in our liberal faith. There is no single pattern of belief or practice. Teachers, physicians, preachers, mill hands, proofreaders and social reformers are included here as good Unitarians. Hungarians, Spaniards, Icelanders, Englishmen, Italians and Americans are included in this Hall of Fame. This is as it should be with a faith which today is held by people in India, Ireland, New Zealand, the United States, Czechoslovakia, Great Britain and many other lands. In each of these countries "something new has been added." Emerson in Massachusetts added Yankee radicalism. Martineau in England added a distinctive mystical power in the expression of our faith. So we might continue noting that *variety* and *freedom* mark our Unitarian way of belief and practice. Exploring, whether by Scott and Stefansson seeking the poles of the earth or by Biddle and Parker finding minds not to be intimidated, is a thrilling proposition. We are still writing "Freedom from Fear" on our banners on every continent. Our work has just begun.

This book was begun during the summer of 1943, when leaders of the Allied armies and navies were meeting in a citadel on the St. Lawrence River to plan a major assault upon the continent of Europe. It may be asked why, in such a time, energy should be taken from shipbuilding and crop harvesting (in which a number of Unitarian ministers and Unitarian young people were engaged) to prepare and publish information on religious leaders in central Europe, England and America so many years ago.

The answer lies closer to the immediate struggle than may seem at first glance apparent. At almost any hour of the day or night one may turn to one's radio and pick up one's newspaper and be told that this is *a people's war*, that it is a struggle for the Four Freedoms — freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want and freedom from fear. With the needs of the people in contrast to the needs of a single class or privileged group Unitarianism has again and again concerned itself. With the final and ultimate freedom of the unshackled human spirit our founders have allied themselves, often at the cost of life itself. To avoid the shortsightedness of a purely contemporary viewpoint, to learn the story of the adventure of hundreds of thousands of men and women seeking such freedoms together in the past, is to deepen our present faith. This is not only a people's war for millions of citizens of many races and many creeds at this hour; it is a step forward in a people's struggle carried on for centuries past, carried on often against terrifying odds, in the certainty that victory would come to children still in cradles or yet unborn. Of such a spirit were Servetus and Biddle, Channing and Eiriksson, and the others presented on these pages.

The indebtedness of the author is most gratefully expressed to those writers who have with infinite patience and scholarly imagination prepared books upon which this modest compilation rests. Appreciation ought particularly to be expressed to the following: Joseph Henry Allen, for *The Unitarians;* J. Estlin Carpenter for *Unitarianism, An Historic Survey;* Frederick B. Mott for *A Short History of Unitarianism since the Reformation;* Earl Morse Wilbur for *Our Unitarian Heritage;* the several contributors to *Unitarianism: Its Origin and History;* and Charles Graves for *A History of Unitarianism.*

He would also like to express his appreciation to the late Hendrik Willem van Loon for the contribution of his illustrations; to the Reverend Halldor Johnson of Winnipeg for the resource material on Magnus Eiriksson; to the Reverend Willard Reed for countless friendly suggestions in his reading of every page; to Dr. Karl W. Deutsch for several rewarding clues; to Miss Edith Gardner for secretarial assistance; and to Frances P. Fritchman for her patience and many creative suggestions.

The author wishes to express his gratitude to the Beacon Press, Coward-McCann, Inc., Houghton Mifflin Company, Oxford Press, Charles Scribner's Sons and the Unitarian Sunday School Society for permission to reprint brief quotations.

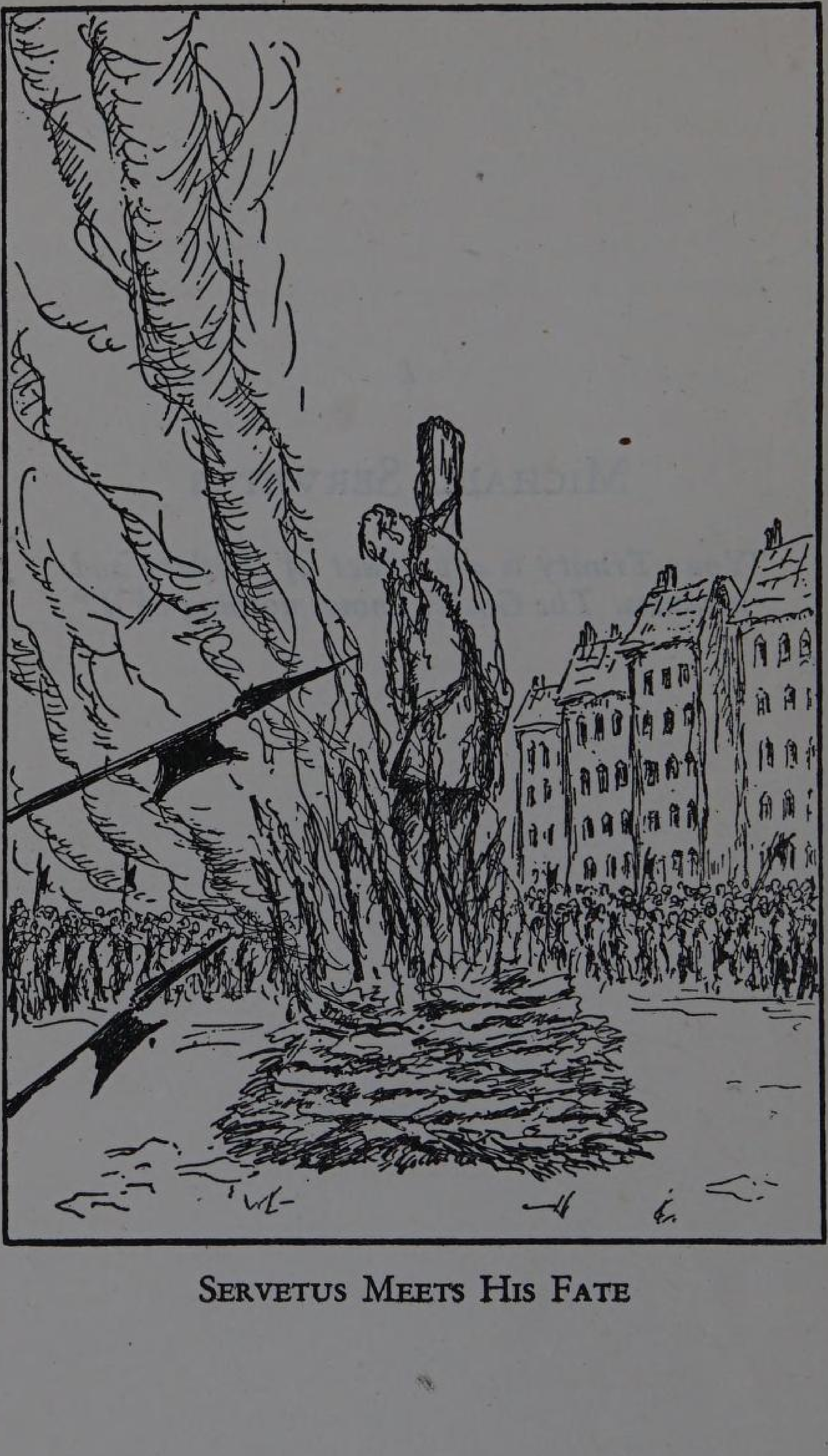
S. H. F.

Boston, Massachusetts
April 1, 1944

I

MICHAEL SERVETUS

"Your Trinity is a product of subtlety and madness. The Gospel knows nothing of it."



Servetus Meets His Fate

I

MICHAEL SERVETUS

"THE flames seen round the world" might well be the slogan used for all time to describe the shocking tragedy of October 27, 1553, in Geneva, Switzerland — the burning at the stake of Michael Servetus for the crime of publishing *On the Errors of the Trinity*. Just as the "shot heard round the world" at Lexington, Massachusetts, in 1775 was a local event with great meanings for all mankind, so the fires kindled with green oak branches around the feet of Servetus in Geneva soon signified for all Christendom the most momentous of facts: *men will die for an idea which they cherish.* One of our most distinguished Unitarian historians rightly stated that this cruel murder on the hill called Champel outside the city limits of Geneva was second only to the death of Jesus on Golgotha fifteen centuries earlier, when one comes to measure its significance for human freedom and dignity. We shall soon see why this statement was no exaggeration.

The burning of Servetus at the stake, at the prompting of John Calvin, Protestant dictator of Geneva, can be said to have started the Unitarian movement. From then on there were always somewhere in the world men who bore witness to one or another of the characteristic convictions of our Unitarian faith. We shall discuss soon which of these "characteristic convictions" Servetus shared. First let us see what manner of man he was.

The Life of Michael Servetus

Michael Servetus was born at Villanueva, in the kingdom of Aragon in Spain, in 1511. His first schooling was in a Spanish Catholic convent. His exceptional talents and serious temperament convinced his friends he was fitted for the priesthood. His own mind, daring and curious, made him more at home with those scholars beginning to ask bedrock questions about religion — men like Erasmus, Melancthon and Martin Luther. It is well to remember that Servetus lived during the turbulent period of the Reformation when a revival of learning and a protest against religious authority (especially that of Catholicism) stirred all active minds. A spirit of inquiry was released which could not be rebottled by the Pope or his cardinals.

Servetus completed his convent education and went to the University of Saragossa. Later he attended the University of Toulouse, where for the first time he read the Old and New Testaments in addition to studying law. This first reading of the Bible itself — a rare thing in those days for a layman — made a startling impression on him, for he found many of the "infallible truths" of the Church unmentioned anywhere within its covers.

It is necessary to have a brief glimpse at religion in Spain at the time of Servetus. Ferdinand and

Isabella, devout Catholics, were on the throne and seeking to stay there by compelling all their subjects to believe alike in religion. Just nineteen years before Servetus' birth 800,000 Jews had been banished from Spain. In Aragon, traditionally liberty-loving, the Inquisition was established to root out heresy. During his boyhood and early manhood 20,000 Jews and Mohammedans were burned to death *for not accepting the dogma of the Trinity.* The more he studied and the more he looked about him and saw the Trinity made a stumbling block for Christian, Jew and Mohammedan, the more he resolved to wage war against this dogma of the church.

In 1529 Servetus became secretary to Juan Quintana, confessor to the Emperor, Charles V. He went to court with his master and never saw his own home or family again. He was present at a memorable scene of regal pomp, the religious coronation of Charles of Germany by Pope Clement VII at Bologna. On this occasion Charles was given the iron crown of Lombardy and the crown of the Holy Roman Empire.

Servetus was depressed by the luxury and extravagance of the Papal Court, and shocked by the marketing of indulgences. Twenty years later, still outraged by memories of this event, he wrote, "With these very eyes I saw him (the Pope) borne with pomp on the shoulders of princes and in the public streets adored by the whole people kneeling, to such a point that those who succeeded even in kissing his feet deemed themselves happy beyond rest."

Soon Servetus left the service of Quintana and sought out as a layman the great leaders of the Protestant movement. The Protestants had not yet formed a creed, and Servetus believed that he could persuade some of the great figures guiding the movement to abolish this doctrine of the Trinity, which had caused so much grief and bloodshed. He tried in vain to see Erasmus, Zwingli and Luther. Those who did see him considered him an impertinent youth, and warned the other Protestant reformers to avoid him. So he sat down and wrote a book destined to become his death warrant, but also a gateway to religious liberty. It was called *On the Errors of the Trinity*, and was published in Alsace in 1531 by a printer who dared not add his name to the title page.

As soon as Calvin, Luther and other prominent leaders read it they hurried to place it under a ban. No book forbidden by Papal edict was ever more fiercely opposed than this little book from Alsace. We today have seen the burning of the books of Mann, Einstein, Heine, and countless others by the Nazis, and know how blind the fury of a bigot can be against a printed page he fears. So Catholics and Protestants banished *On the Errors of the Trinity*. Thousands of copies were sold throughout Switzerland, Germany and Northern Italy. But at the time of his trial, just before his death, so few copies were available, due to the ban, that his enemies had great difficulty in finding a copy to quote against him and later to chain to his body when he was burned. Today only three copies exist.

Finding himself utterly unsuccessful at the centers of religious controversy, Basle and Geneva, and in danger of a trial for heresy, Servetus fled to France and assumed a new name, Michael Villanovanus. In Paris he attended the University, studying mathematics and becoming so able in his field that he was asked to lecture on the subject. Here in Paris he met John Calvin, who was becoming prominent in Protestant circles, later to be his arch foe. Financial difficulties interrupted his studies, and he went to Lyons and became a proofreader at a publishing house. He edited and read the proofs of a new edition of the Bible and of the works of the great geographer Ptolemy. His original notes and observations on the Old Testament, showing that the Prophets and Psalms did not predict the coming of Christ but referred to current situations in the time of the writer, make Servetus one of the first scientific scholars of the Bible. His method of freshly analyzing the Bible later became an historical science called "higher criticism."

Having saved some money, Servetus returned to Paris and studied medicine, eventually securing his M. D. degree. His brilliance as a student won him great renown. For many years he practiced medicine successfully, so much so that other doctors in his community threatened his life because of their loss of patients. Servetus as a student of medicine first discovered the circulation of the blood, but made no special announcement of it; and this fact, so revolutionary to medicine in its import, went unrecognized until Harvey rediscovered it 150 years later. Servetus spent ten years as personal physician to the Archbishop of Vienne.

We have no space to tell in detail the final chapters in the life of Servetus, the mathematician, proofreader, doctor and theologian. He entered into a violent controversy by mail with John Calvin, now the famous Protestant "Pope" of Geneva. These letters do not reflect credit on Servetus; far from it, for while he laudably tried to correct Calvin's views on the Trinity, his extravagant temper, bitter language and quarrelsome spirit reveal a side of his personality that is not attractive.

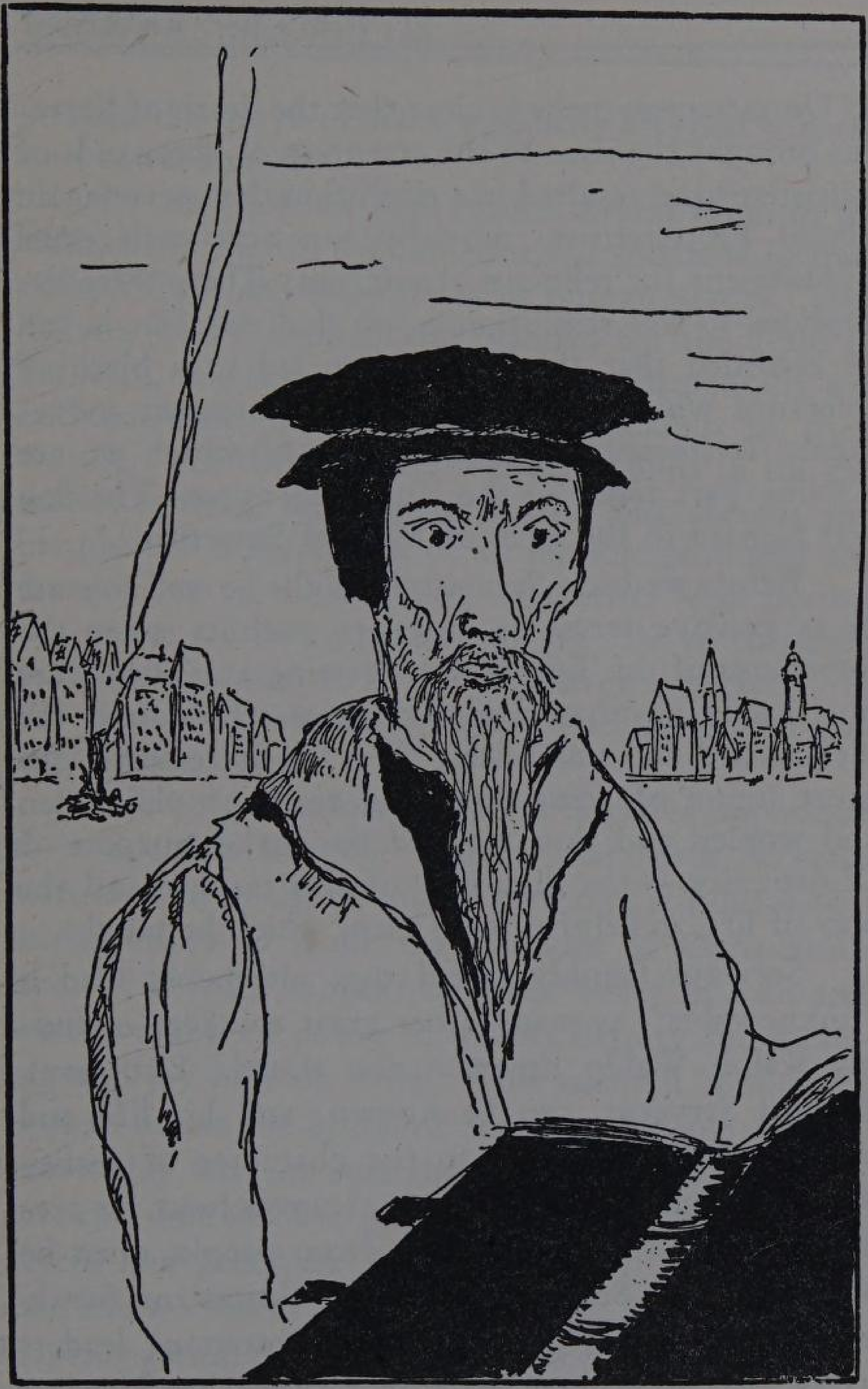
He published another book, *The Restoration of Christianity*. It contained plans for a far more thoroughgoing reformation than Luther or Calvin had ever anticipated. The publisher, under orders to send the thousand copies to the annual fairs at Frankfurt and elsewhere at Easter time, sent one copy to Calvin. The inevitable result followed. Calvin, feeling such a book would hurt his reputation and his cause, sent an agent to France to find the author of this heresy. (The book included the original material on the errors of the Trinity.) Ellery Queen could make a detective story out of the machinations which followed. Dr. Villanovanus was discovered to be Michael Servetus. The agents of the Inquisition (Catholic, of course) were notified by Calvin's agents of the presence of a heretic in their midst, and soon Servetus was imprisoned. He escaped prison in France only to be recaptured by Calvin's own police soon after in Geneva. The trial lasted from August through October (1553) and consisted of endless arguments between Servetus and Calvin, ending in a verdict of "guilty" for Servetus — guilty of calling the Trinity "a monster with three heads," but also guilty of having threatened the security of John Calvin and his theocratic government in Switzerland. Urged to recant as he was led to the stake he refused, crying out as the flames consumed him: "O God, save my soul; O Jesus, have compassion on me." Calvin remained at home behind closed doors.

What Did Servetus Believe?

Michael Servetus laid the first massive stone in place for the foundation of the faith we as Unitarians cherish today. Most simply it is stated in three words, *God Is One*. Since today the overwhelming majority of Christians still reject this simple statement, we ought to take a moment to state the reason why the problem arose. Since the word "Unitarian" itself suggests the word unity, we can pause long enough to discover the reason for the struggle which sent many men including Servetus to their deaths.

When Servetus declared that "God is one and indivisible" he revived an argument which takes us back to a city in Asia Minor called Nicaea in 325 A.D. Here it was determined for centuries to come, by the pressure of the Emperor Constantine upon a great church council, that subscription by all Christians to a certain creed was required. This creed was known as the Nicene Creed, and it stated the conviction of the theologian Athanasius and his followers that Christ was of the same "substance" as God. This opinion, which stated that God was to be described as a Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit became official for Christians by the decree of the Emperor. The defeated minority led by a man named Arius had stressed the humanity of Jesus, the belief that he was of a different "substance" from God. The books and papers of Arius were burned, their possession by others made a capital crime, and his followers declared to be enemies of Christianity.

It is important for us to remember one fact about Servetus. He was the first strong and independent thinker, well educated, successful in several fields of learning, capable of seriously challenging the 1200-year tradition of the Trinity. He focused the spotlight of thought upon a great stumbling block to honest Christian faith. He cried out in a voice no man could fail to hear: "Your Trinity is a product of subtlety and madness. The Gospel knows nothing of it." To be sure, the contemporary leaders of the new Protestant movement, still unsure of its future, clamped down on this youthful heretic with speed and force. Many historians tell us that a less provocative person than Servetus might have quietly won a partial victory, that his sharp tongue and hot temper cost him not only his life but victory for his ideas. Such a conclusion of course is guesswork, and very dangerous guesswork at that. Such might have been the case, but later events teach us that church leaders again and again opposed the first sign of firm opposition to this and other doctrines which they feared might "upset the applecart." Certainly our scholars in the studies



Calvin's Law Triumphed

of Unitarianism make it clear that the death of Servetus brought the issue to the attention of thousands of Christians and resulted in a resolution that never again would Protestantism officially sanction such cruel punishment for religious conviction. There were exceptions to this resolution as we shall see, but it can be recorded that this martyrdom led to a birth of tolerance which strengthened the Protestant movement. It started also a movement of which we are a living part today — the Unitarian cause. The flag was planted in the ashes of Michael Servetus.

Before we leave Servetus it might be well to state in as positive terms as language permits what the opponents of the Trinity were getting at. They were not simply obstinate logic-choppers who found the idea absurd and unbiblical; they felt it removed the great figure of Jesus from the grasp of plain men and women and thus violated the major purpose of Christianity — the discovery of this teacher and the way of life, so helpful to all men, which he taught.

Servetus frankly stated that ultimately God is "unknowable," as many other great thinkers including Ralph Waldo Emerson also stated. But Jesus, claimed Servetus, can be known, and his life and teachings offer us clues to the character of reality which men call God. Whatever removes Jesus, his personality, his life and teachings from people, must be opposed. This Servetus and later Unitarians firmly insisted upon. Luther and other Protestant leaders stressed the suffering of Jesus on the cross, but Servetus stressed the *worth* of Jesus, especially his good will and love toward men.

In this book we shall return several times to the Unitarian belief in the fundamental goodness, in spite of handicaps and weaknesses, of human nature. John Calvin, who conspired and planned for the death of Servetus, felt that man's nature is fundamentally evil and corrupt. Servetus challenged Calvin in these words: "All that men do you say is done in sin and merits nothing but eternal death. But therein you blaspheme. Stripping us of all possible goodness, you do violence to the teaching of Christ, who ascribes the power of being perfect to us: 'Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.' In the works of the saintly, there is nothing of the corruption you feign."

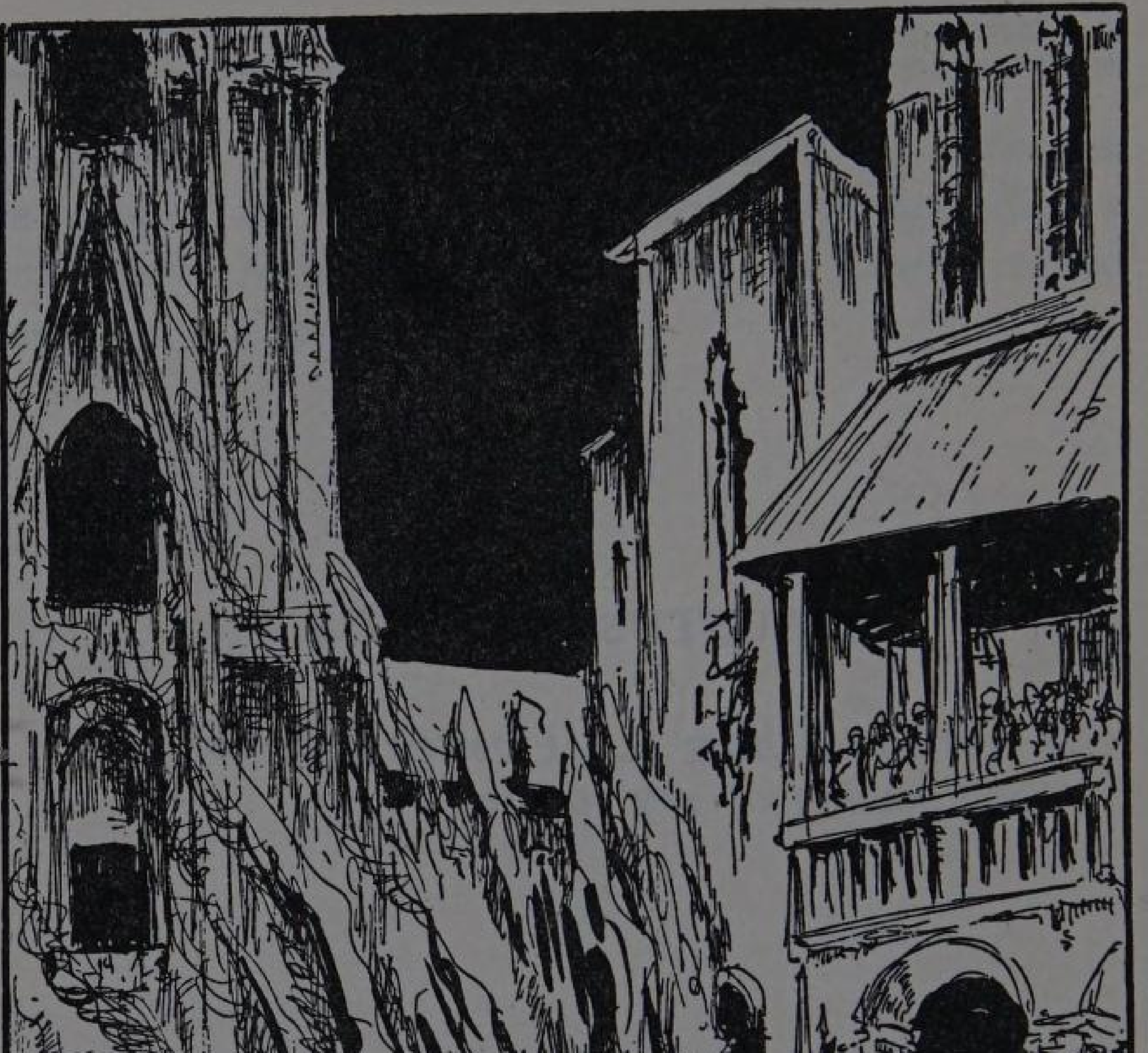
It is not, therefore, simply a negative opposition to a doctrine like the Trinity that gives Servetus stature to us in the twentieth century; it is his determined effort to make the Founder of Christianity known; it is his support of Jesus' belief in men and women and their power to achieve dignity and meaning and joy here on earth. This essential confidence in man unites the Spaniard Servetus to those Americans today who are sure that the human spirit is not corrupt, but flexible and resilient, capable of being decent and generous. It is this faith that appeals to men and women in Prague and Madras, in Utrecht and Copenhagen, and in many other places where people of the free religious spirit work and pray.

It was for this faith in man and his faculties, empowered by God, that Servetus lived and died a hero. Little wonder that four cities in Europe raised statues in his honor.

2

FAUSTUS SOCINUS

"I retract nothing . . . I hasten with joy to the finishing of my course."



The Burning of the Books

2

FAUSTUS SOCINUS

AMERICANS have always admired the man who can tackle a hard job and whip it into shape and turn out results. Sometimes it has been an important assignment like getting the tracks of the Union Pacific Railroad through the Rockies; sometimes it has been a relatively minor job like winning the America's Cup races off Long Island every summer before the war.

The story of Unitarianism as a church movement, rather than as a personal conviction of a man like Servetus, really begins with a great organizer of religious activities, an Italian named Faustus Socinus. In wartime America a great industrialist, Henry Kaiser, organizes ship building, and Glenn L. Martin, one of our most gifted inventors, organizes aircraft construction, and if they had known Faustus Socinus, they would certainly have admired him as a man who could stand by a very tough problem and work out solutions in spite of the most stubborn difficulties. This chapter is the story of how our church was organized by the executive genius of a wealthy citizen of Siena in Tuscany, Italy.

One of the most stirring scenes in Unitarian history was the attack on Socinus in Cracow, Poland,

and the burning of his books and papers by an infuriated crowd. It is impossible to tell the story of our Unitarian cause simply as ideas neatly developed by theologians in book-lined studies. Liberal religion is the record of one dramatic episode after another. We can understand the book-burning of Cracow, because the smoke of burning books is smelled today wherever Fascist Storm Troopers march into conquered nations with lists of forbidden volumes in their pockets.

On Ascension Day, 1598, a mob of students, under Jesuit suggestion, thronged the streets of Cracow, Poland, where Faustus Socinus then lived, seeking out his house and demanding that he appear. Though sick in bed he was forced to surrender, half-naked, to the crowd who hurried him to the market-place, while he watched the leaders of the violence cast his manuscripts into a bonfire. With a drawn sword over his head and with death by fire threatened before him, he cried out, "I retract nothing. What I was I am, and by the grace of the Lord Jesus that I shall be to my last breath." The fifty-nine-year-old invalid, more responsible than any single man for the great successes of Unitarianism in Poland for the previous quarter-century, was permitted to return home after his major book, still in manuscript and the result of a lifetime of writing, crumbled in ashes on the cobblestones of Cracow. For three hundred years thereafter in many parts of the world Unitarians were called *Socinians,* followers of this incorruptible man of Italy.

The Life of Faustus Socinus

Faustus Socinus was born in Siena, Italy, in 1539. He was the nephew of Laelius Socinus, who had been a prominent Unitarian in Zurich, Switzerland, in the days of John Calvin. His father died when Faustus was two years old, and he was brought up without much formal schooling. Soon after he came of age one of his family was arrested by the agents of the Catholic Inquisition as one suspected of harboring subversive Protestant convictions, and at that signal the remaining members fled to Lyon, France, and later to Geneva. While Faustus was at Lyon his Uncle Laelius died and bequeathed his nephew not only a substantial fortune but also his Unitarian manuscripts and books.

Some seeds take a long time to sprout. While Faustus probably read the books left him by his uncle, we have no visible sign of it. He returned to Italy, participated in the court life of Florence in the service of Isabella de' Medici, and seemed a good Catholic. Twelve years later Isabella died and Socinus traveled to Basle, Switzerland, a center of religious controversy. (You have probably noticed that in the sixteenth century religion was as popular and exciting a subject as economics or politics today.) For three years he studied the Bible and other books. Here he wrote a book, *On Christ the Savior*, which proposed the unorthodox view that Christ is our Savior because he showed us the way to salvation — namely, imitation of him — rather than because he suffered for our sins. He was called to Transylvania to take part in a vigorous debate with Francis David, whom we shall meet later, a debate over the propriety of worshiping Christ.

Early in 1579 Socinus arrived in Cracow, Poland, where he remained for twenty-five years and made his major contributions as an organizer of Unitarianism. As we shall soon note Poland was the most hospitable country to Unitarians. This is why Socinus went to Poland. In two Latin folios called "The Polish Brethren," written by his friends, the records of these years up to the brutal attack on him in 1598 have been kept. We are told he was tall, with a prominent forehead and fine eyes. He lived with little self-indulgence, having delicate health. He enjoyed debate and discussion and won many to the Unitarian faith by his patience in presenting his arguments, his tolerance of opposing views, his insistence upon the power of persuasion, a rare virtue in those violent days when swords and fagots accompanied far too many controversies on religion.

To understand the contributions of Socinus we should stop long enough to see the kind of country Poland was, the kind of people that inhabited it in the sixteenth century. Today, with Poland laid waste by Nazi occupation and its Jewish citizens slain to the appalling number of two millions and its other citizens in slavery to German masters, it is well to recall the glory of the nation several centuries before.

Poland, the Cradle of Unitarianism

At the time of the Protestant Reformation (when men and churches declared their independence of the Catholic Church[1]) Poland was a great and powerful monarchy, a nation marked by a high degree of civilization and enlightenment. It was about the size of Texas, and its capital, Cracow, was the seat of a great univeristy. Here Copernicus the astronomer had lived and worked.

Poland accepted Christianity in the tenth century; but the nobles, who formed about one tenth of the population and were the landowning class, resented outside interference with their religious life. When the Catholic Church was powerful in Western Europe, its control in Poland was very slight. The Poles anticipated the work of Martin Luther, and under the influence of John Hus of Bohemia, and the Waldensians of Italy, became Protestants. Today if we were timid people we would say they were "prematurely and excessively anti-Catholic." When the Reformation came along under Luther and Calvin it took hold quickly, the nobles especially co-operating wholeheartedly. By 1550 all control of the Catholic Church was broken in Poland for a long period. Two thousand Catholic churches became Protestant. King Sigismund Augustus II (1548–1572), a tolerant Catholic, refused to persecute the Protestants, and the year after his death the Diet (delegate government) passed a law guaranteeing freedom of religious conviction to everyone and requiring the kings thereafter to pledge themselves to keep it.

---

[1] An event traditionally associated with Martin Luther's act in 1517 of nailing ninety-five theses (propositions) to the church door at Wittenberg, Germany.

There is not space here to report in detail on the first stirrings of Unitarianism in Poland. In a spiritual atmosphere so open to the quest of knowledge, it is not surprising that a book like Michael Servetus' *On the Errors of the Trinity* found friendly readers. Laelius Socinus, uncle to Faustus, visited Cracow in 1549 and met a free-minded Franciscan monk named Lismanino who had read sermons by an Italian Unitarian named Ochino. A young minister of the Reformed Church in Poland, Gonesius by name, deserves the credit for first publicly teaching the error of the Trinity, which he had learned by reading Servetus when still a student for the Catholic priesthood in Switzerland.

The most important forerunner of Socinus in Poland was Giorgio Biandrata, an Italian physician who had once been a friend of Calvin in Geneva but soon became a Unitarian, and (for safety from the intolerant Genevan) fled to Poland in 1558. *Under his leadership the first Unitarian church was formed in* 1565. This was the first Unitarian church as such in history and the first effort since the days of Arius in the fourth century to have a group of Christian believers organized around the idea of the unity of God. Biandrata prepared the way for Faustus Socinus, the great organizer. As might be expected, John Calvin wrote letters to influential Polish nobles warning them against the heretic Biandrata; but with uncommon good sense the nobles ignored what we today call "baiting" a man for his opinions, and instead asked Biandrata to state his faith, his positive convictions.

The Contribution of Socinus to Unitarianism

A strong, appealing and intelligent leader was needed to unite the liberals of Poland into a religious organization, a church movement capable of seeking supporters and converts. The forty-year-old Faustus Socinus became such a leader. Through marriage with the daughter of a nobleman living near Cracow he became acquainted with many persons of great influence. At the request of the churches he replied to attacks by the Jesuits at Posen who sought to discredit the popularity of the new ideas about the unity of God. After the Synod of Brest — a church conference of great importance where he elaborated the main points of the Unitarian doctrine — Socinus was acknowledged to be the leader of thought in the Protestant circles of Poland.

Socinus established a school at Rakow with a faculty famed all over Europe for its learning. It numbered a thousand students, including so many from Germany that special language classes were held for them. Here in Rakow he also set up a printing press and published many books and pamphlets by Socinian writers.[2] Churches of the Unitarian faith were established in all the chief cities of Poland, and beside each church was a school with younger ministers as teachers. Leaders amongst princes and nobility as well as civil officers, teachers and professional leaders, peasants and craftsmen became followers of Socinus. In the year 1605 a Socinian named Demetrius, sat on the throne of Russia. More important was the popular support among the people of Poland. In 1612 there were probably 300 Socinian congregations in Poland. Missionaries were trained at Rakow for spreading the faith in other countries. Money was raised to pay salaries of ministers, to grant aid to students for the ministry and to assist Unitarians destitute because of persecution in other lands.

---

[2] The Racovian Catechism begun at Rakow by Socinus and completed after his death by Polish Unitarians in 1605 was in print for over two centuries. It did more than any other book except the New Testament to spread Unitarian ideas about religion.

Socinus, like English and American Unitarians later, did not want to form a new denomination or sect; and during his twenty-five years in Poland he made proposals to many other churches for adopting Unitarian convictions without starting new congregations. He suggested mergers and the liberalizing of the existing churches. These Polish Unitarians were ardent propagandists for their faith. They endured persecution beyond words to tell. They held public debates on religion whenever possible. They published the results of the debates and laid stress on reason and argument, not passion and rhetoric. One of the most famous debates, lasting for fifteen years (1603–1618), was with the Jesuits. Copies of the published debates and other books reached Holland, Germany, France and England, with the practical results of new converts being made and groups organized.

Poland was after all a Catholic country, and gradually the resistance to the aggressive and forthright Unitarian movement increased. We have already mentioned the tragic attack on Socinus in 1598. This was the first use of violence by a crowd urged on by Jesuit leaders in Rakow. Two Catholic professors, at a risk to their own safety, saved him from being thrown into the Vistula River. Socinus died six years later in retirement.

In 1611 a certain Jan Tyskiewicz, a wealthy Unitarian citizen of Bielsk, was the victim of a plot by covetous relatives which ended in his being burned at the stake in Warsaw for "blasphemy" — that is, he refused to take an oath in court using the formula of the Trinity. From this time on, a systematic campaign was carried on against Unitarians. In 1627 in Lubin the Catholics destroyed the Socinian church through mob action, though "underground" services (to use a modern term) were held long thereafter.

In 1638 two vandals destroyed a crucifix near Rakow. They were identified as students at the Unitarian college. This reckless and inexcusable act (possibly provoked intentionally to create an "incident," as scholars now believe was the case) soon involved whole populations of Catholics against Socinians. The Polish Senate, ignoring the protests of the Diet's lower house, decreed that the college be destroyed, that the church be taken from the "Arians" (using the fourth-century term) and their printing press wrecked. The professors, teachers and ministers were branded as guilty of a crime against the state and outlawed. Twenty years later, a decree was passed by the Diet of Warsaw, under complete Catholic control, banishing all Socinians from the nation. In 1661 the edict was carried out with the venom and thoroughness of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain years before. To harbor a Socinian in one's home was made an offense punishable by death. Communist revolutionaries captured by the Czar's police before the Revolution of 1917 in Russia were not punished as cruelly as were Unitarians in Poland at the end of the seventeenth century. To the everlasting glory of our spiritual forefathers it should be noted in the record that in spite of these appalling edicts services continued to be held in private houses, in the fields and forests. At Leyden, Holland, ministers of incredible courage were trained for this daring ministry in Poland. Only when the historic "Partition of Poland" occurred did two of the three nations restore religious liberty — Austria and Russia ruling that the *dissidents* (including Unitarians) should have freedom as Protestants. Thus ended the struggles of the earliest organized Unitarian enterprise.

The Teachings of Socinus

When we read the histories to see what Socinus taught, it seems strange to our modern minds that such opposition could have been aroused — until we remember that today in certain southern states of the United States orthodox Christians would have the same emotional reactions to Unitarian ideas, even though they would be more restrained in following them into action than were the seventeenth-century Poles. Socinus denied the Trinity, the deity of Jesus, the personality of the devil, the total depravity of man and the eternity of punishment. Human salvation consists in imitating Christ's virtue. The Bible is to be interpreted by human reason. He opposed the lawfulness of war, capital punishment and oath-taking. He felt that men had freedom of will, a capacity for virtue and the power of reason in religion. He centered his Christianity in the teachings of the Bible rather than in the creeds of church councils or the writings of the church fathers.

Important as their radical religious views were, the disciples of Socinus were even more united in their *discipline* or common practice as religious persons. This practice included care for orphans and widows, refusal to fight or go to court, refusal to hold serfs. One reason they did not become more numerous was that they insisted upon these high standards of personal conduct. Like the Quakers later, the first Unitarians had a group morale. They criticized each other, they strengthened each other, they worked as groups in worship, in missionary effort, and in the total pattern of their social life. We find none of the excessive individualism which has marked "being a Unitarian" in recent decades in America and England.

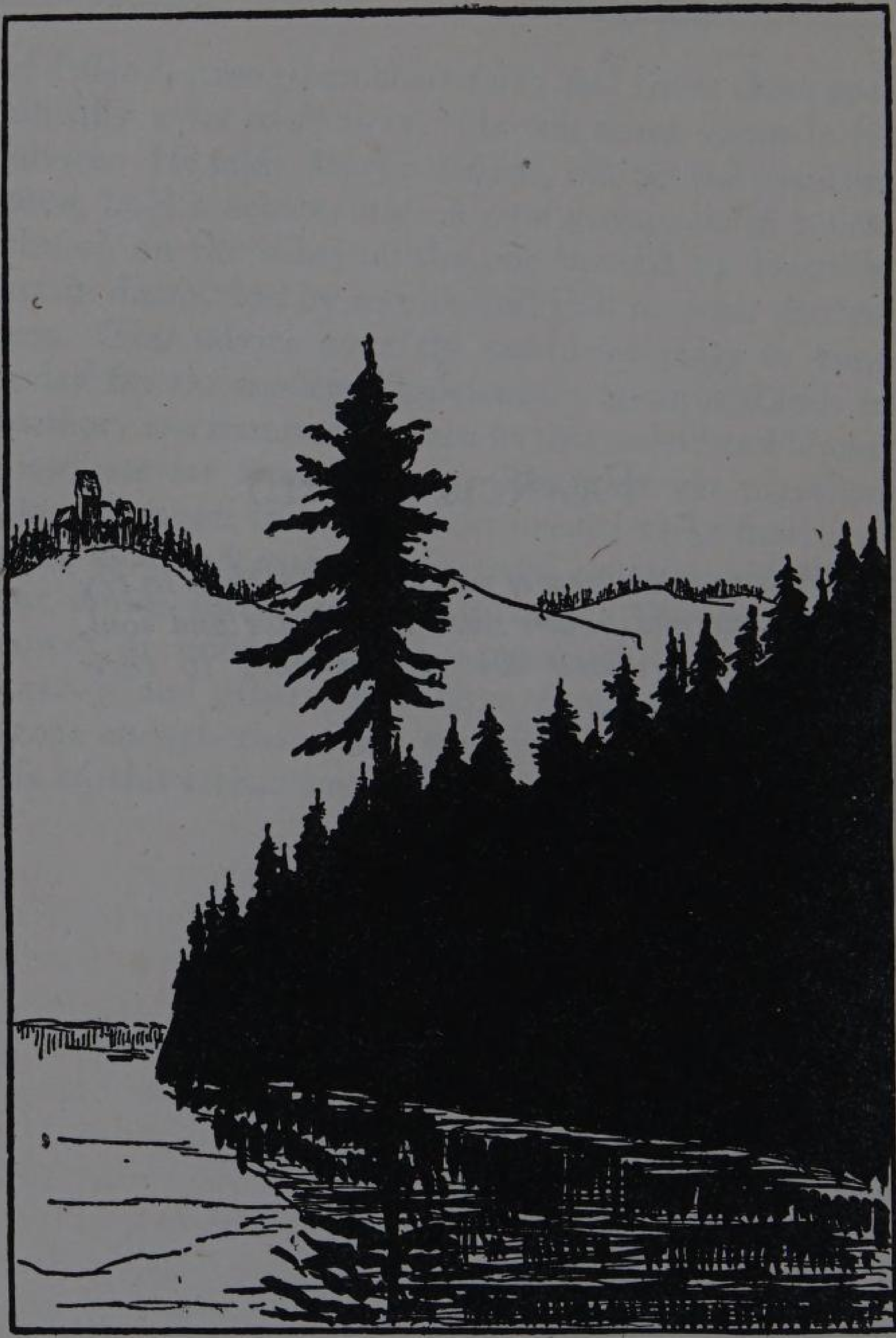
Socinus and Modern Unitarianism

Our debt to Faustus Socinus is a great one. He remains for us not the great theologian like Channing, nor the great reformer like Parker, but the dauntless organizer of a new church. He was a bold man indeed to unite and mobilize the heroic men and women of Poland, strengthen their faith and show them specifically *what to do next.* He was never vague in his advice. He said: Start a college, ink up the printing press, hold a debate, start a new group, build a new church on the ashes of the one burned by fanatics, attain distinction by service and skill in your profession. This advice over the centuries rings in tune today for the modern conscience. Socinus stands in memory as a monitor to warn us that sound and liberal views are far from enough. We must get together, plan in unison to do the most needed tasks first, and serve God and man by the most exacting standards our minds and experience dictate. The prodigious power of endurance the persecuted Unitarians in Cracow and other Polish cities demonstrated is evidence enough that there was spiritual energy in the life of this Italian organizer in their midst.

3

Francis David

“There is no greater piece of folly than to try to exercise power over conscience and soul, both of which are subject only to their Creator.”



Francis David Disappeared in a Castle and Died

3

FRANCIS DAVID

THIS is the story of one of the greatest public debates ever held in the history of Christianity, a debate comparable in its effects to the Lincoln-Douglas debates on slavery in 1858 in Illinois. If Hungary in 1568 had possessed microphones and radio networks and newsreel cameras, giant newspaper printing presses and columnists adding "colorful details," the results could have been shared by more people, but probably no more excitement or popular enthusiasm would have resulted. Realize, if you can, that a popular debate, breathlessly followed day after day by cobblers and kings alike, lasted for ten days in the court of King John Sigismund at Gyulafejervar.[1] Bishop Melius, representing the Calvinist (then called *Reformed*) churches, and Francis David, leader of the Unitarian believers, were the two principals in the event. It not only ended with a victory for David but ushered in "the golden age of Unitarianism in Hungary" which to this day has the longest record of continuous Unitarian activity anywhere in the world. (You will recall that Polish Unitarianism was stamped out by violence and law.)

---

[1] Throughout this book place names and names of people may often seem difficult. These early Unitarians would have been equally troubled by the Passagassawakeag River in Maine, Patchogue on Long Island or Hnausa in Manitoba.

This great debate, one of many carried on by David, should live in our memories as a great triumph of our faith. The King, a Unitarian himself (the only one in history to practise his faith and write religious freedom into law), attended the debate, stenographers took down the speeches, nobles and clergy from miles around came day after day. Shopkeepers and farmers discussed the progress of the debate on the streets and in the fields. When the event was concluded it led to a triumphal procession from Gyulafejervar to Kolozsvar. The town turned out with thousands crowding the streets, cheering with all the vigor Americans today reserve for a visit of the President or the return of a "World Series" team after winning the pennant. This was a period when great popular interest in religion developed.

From his carriage David stepped out upon a large stone in front of the church and spoke to the throng. His speech was so persuasive that reporters of the period tell us "the whole population of Kolozsvar accepted the Unitarian faith." We may take this with some salt; but certain it is that the crowd carried David on their shoulders into the church in the square, St. Michael's, and shouting loudly insisted that he continue speaking. Incidentally the stone on which he stood in the square has become a priceless shrine (not magical or superstitiously revered but of cherished historical significance) to Unitarians, and when last heard of before the present war was preserved in our Unitarian college in Kolozsvar. We Americans can understand such symbolic veneration of a stone, for we have our Plymouth Rock of 1620 fame, properly cherished as a reminder that other men, valuing religious liberty highly, sought its preservation. As a matter of fact, we ought to remember the stone of Kolozsvar and the date 1568 as carefully as we remember the Plymouth Rock of 1620. Both stand for religious liberty achieved for the people, and at a mighty price. The spiritual life of humanity was deepened, for centuries to come, by this event.

The Ram's Head — Transylvania

Since a surprising number of Unitarians in the United States and Canada still think that our free religious faith began in England or America, it is worth while for us to take a little space to discuss one of the most beautiful sections of earth known to civilization, which happens to be the green cradle of the Unitarian church — it is called *Transylvania*. Shaped like a ram's head, and in size about one-half the State of Maine, Transylvania is a natural unit hedged in by the snow-crowned Carpathian Mountains. It has been controlled from time to time by Hungary and Rumania, and has been affected by immigration from Germany, Turkey and Austria. Transylvania, a great natural basin of 16,000 square miles, is a place of agreeable climate, fertile soil and rich minerals.

Transylvania has been called the country of *three nations* and *four religions*. To understand the role of Unitarianism it would be well to see what historians mean by this Transylvanian arithmetic. The "three nations" refer to the *Szeklers,* who claimed to be frontiersmen descended from Attila the Hun; the *Magyars,* from the same race and tongue but separated in the tenth century after a second Hunnish invasion, and possessing the land they named Hungary; and the *Saxons,* Germans who colonized in this ram's head country in the twelfth century and held it against many attacks. This third group, the Saxons, were very conservative, fearful of change, and yet valiant men. These traditional three nations were far from making up all the inhabitants of Transylvania. There were also Rumanians, Armenians, Jews and others.

The four religions are important to our story. They are the Catholic, the Lutheran, the Calvinist (here called Reformed) and the Unitarian. The Unitarian faith used the Magyar language so that Saxons joining our churches had to renounce not only their Lutheran creed but also their German speech.

The Reformation (beginning, you will remember, for purposes of simplified history, with Luther and his hammer and ninety-five theses in 1517) came early to Transylvania. In 1529 a decree of exile was issued against Catholics. In 1530 Kronstadt, the major city of the Saxon population, professed Lutheranism, followed ten years later by the Magyar capital, Kolozsvar. At this time (1540) there were individual Unitarians.

In 1563, Queen Isabella of Transylvania, daughter of King Sigismund of Poland, who for several years had been Regent to her son Prince John Sigismund, invited Giorgio Biandrata (whom we have met before in Poland) to come to her country as court physician because her son, now king, was ill. This he was glad to do, being under severe attack by friends of John Calvin. Young John Sigismund was deeply influenced by Biandrata's teaching and by the example also of his mother, who was a Unitarian, and he became the one great Unitarian king in history. It was in his reign, as we soon shall see, that the Magna Charta of religious freedom was declared for all of the four religions previously described. The year was 1568, the same as that of David's triumphant debate over Melius, the Calvinist.

The Life of Francis David

Francis David was born in 1510 in Kolozsvar, the capital of Transylvania. He was the son of a shoemaker, and because of this humble background he was kept from the advanced education his talents called for until he was thirty-eight years old. At that time he was sent by his Catholic instructors (men of singularly liberal temperament, it seems) to the Lutheran University of Wittenberg, Germany. Luther was but two years dead, and the religious controversy of Protstantism was very much alive. David returned in 1551 and became a country school teacher. At that time he belonged to the liberal wing of the Catholic clergy. His interest and rare ability in preaching led to his appointment in 1556 as metropolitan preacher in Kolozsvar. At the age of forty-six, his great career actually began.

By this time David was a Lutheran in convictions and had given up the Catholic priesthood; and soon afterwards began his debates with the Calvinists. He was soon made the leader (called bishop by Transylvanian law to this day) of the Protestants. Having an open mind, he finally after much public debate accepted the Calvinist idea of the Lord's Supper (the Eucharist in Catholic terminology), and therefore resigned his Lutheran bishopric. He did not leave his Church, however, but instead became the leader of the Calvinists, including the King. David at the height of his powers was recognized throughout all Transylvania as the most eloquent of preachers. He was appointed court preacher and later made Bishop in the Reformed Church (that is, the *Calvinist*).

At this point Giorgio Biandrata, court physician and Unitarian propagandist, appears on the scene. He became familiar with the new court preacher, and proceeded to tell him of his hopes for a further Reformation of church doctrines. Biandrata had learned in Italy, Switzerland and Poland the necessity for gradual education and persuasion in winning converts to his cause. In the same year, however, (1564) we find Francis David eloquently arguing before the King against the idea of the Trinity. In 1566 he preached against the Trinity in his pulpit in Kolozsvar. The attitude of all Kolozsvar changed with him, we are told. The Town Council gave its official support. He became the head of Transylvania's leading college.

The peak of his Unitarian influence came in the event to which reference has already been made — the Edict of 1568. In January of that year King Sigismund issued a royal edict confirmed by the authority of the Diet of Torda (governmental congress), which declared "that preachers shall be allowed to preach the Gospel everywhere, each according to his own understanding of it. If the community wish to accept such preaching, well and good: if not they shall not be compelled, but shall be allowed to keep the preachers they prefer. No one shall be made to suffer on account of his religion, since faith is the gift of God."

One can see in this statement the influence of David, who had dedicated his book, *On the True and False Knowledge of the One God,*[2] to the young liberal, King John Sigismund. The dedication included the sentence opening our chapter: —

> *"There is no greater piece of folly than to try to exercise power over conscience and soul, both of which are subject only to their Creator."*

King John Sigismund's Unitarian mother, Queen Isabella, had at a previous Diet of Torda in 1557, eleven years before, issued an edict of toleration "in order that each might hold the faith which he wished." This had been the first declaration of religious freedom since the decree of that amazing little democracy of the Grisons in the Alps (partly Switzerland, partly

---

[2] We are told by the distinguished Unitarian historian, Earl Morse Wilbur, in his *Our Unitarian Heritage,* that David's book outraged the orthodox by using clear pictures ridiculing the trinitarian idea of God. They complained that this was irreverent; but the real basis of their fear was the appeal of the pictures to the common people, who could understand them better than hair-splitting arguments by the theologians. Few books on theology have learned this lesson taught by David.

Italy) in 1526. Lest we feel at all smug that such religious toleration was first achieved by the enlightened element in the Christian churches, it might be well to note in passing that somewhat earlier Mohammedan Turkey allowed greater freedom of faith. To Turkey had fled many early antitrinitarians to save their lives from bigots both Catholic and Protestant.

The decree of the Diet of Torda, at which Francis David made his historic plea for religious toleration, now made famous in a painting hung in many Unitarian churches, was the first declaration by a parliamentary body and ruler of full religious toleration. This truly great achievement of liberal-minded men in the sixteenth century has special importance for Unitarians. It explains why, in spite of evil days of persecution later, our faith was not utterly expelled from Transylvania as it was crushed in other countries.

About the same time that this edict was passed in Torda, the Inquisition was ruthlessly persecuting Protestants in Spain and Italy. Protestants by the thousands were being slaughtered in the Netherlands; Englishmen were killing 20,000 people; and at the infamous St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre in France 30,000 Huguenots died as martyrs to their new Protestant faith. The King, John Sigismund, who issued this great Hungarian decree, was twenty-eight years old at the time, a splendid tribute to the statesmanship of youth.

This edict alarmed the Calvinists, especially Bishop Melius, who had once persuaded David to change his mind. He challenged David to a debate. Under the auspices of King John Sigismund, the great event was called at the royal palace at Gyulafejervar. Five debaters participated on the Unitarian side, Francis David and Biandrata leading the Unitarians, Melius leading the six Calvinists. The debate, with which we began this chapter, opened March 8, 1568, at five o'clock in the morning, starting with solemn prayers in Latin. (The entire ten days of debate were in Latin, too.) From the seats of the nobles and ministers questions were interjected. The heat of controversy was often intense. Tempers were sometimes whetted to a knife-edge sharpness. The Calvinists quoted the Bible and the church fathers; the Unitarians the Bible alone. Evidence is clear that David knew his Bible magnificently, and used this skill to great advantage. He was the spiritual hero of the ten-day conclave, and emerged the greatest spokesman of Unitarianism Europe has ever known. On the ninth day the Calvinists sought to withdraw. The King smiled and said this would be conceding defeat, so they remained another day. It was clear by now that nothing could be gained by further debate, since personal abuse was lowering the character of the controversy. The debate was recognized as a victory for the Unitarians, as was begrudgingly admitted by the Calvinist reporter of the event, who wrote that "the debate ended without profit to the church of Christ."

We saw earlier in this chapter how the debate resulted in tremendous popularity for the Unitarian cause in Kolozsvar and throughout Transylvania. To be sure, the Saxon (German) Lutherans in Kolozsvar migrated elsewhere in displeasure. From 1568 on, the city was a Unitarian stronghold. All of its churches and schools were Unitarian, and Francis David was made bishop for the third time, but this time as a Unitarian.

To please and assist the Hungarians, who after the great debate had found themselves under bitter attack by the Calvinists in various synods (regional church conferences), Francis David with the King's sanction held a second debate two years later, this time in the Hungarian language and in their city of Nagyvarad. This second debate included the King, the nobles and the clergy, and was larger than the earlier one in Gyulafejervar. When Melius, again the Calvinist spokesman, became abusive of David to an extreme which irritated even the tolerant King, the monarch told Melius to curb his tongue or leave the country, saying "We wish that in our dominions there be freedom of conscience." At the end of six days the King closed the debate. It was again a clear victory for the Unitarians, who won fresh support from many sides. The orthodox minority drew up a statement of their convictions and withdrew.

The time had come to adopt the name *Unitarian*, which had been used often but never officially. In 1576 the churches holding to the views against the Trinity and for complete religious freedom were described as "those holding the religion of Francis David." The 1577 Diet of Torda statement simply refers to those "of the other religion." Not until 1600 do the records use the name "Unitarian" to refer to them, and not until 1638 do we find the term used as the official designation of the church. It is important to note this, because here in Transylvania and later in England and America the term "Unitarian" to describe the organized fellowship of believers in these ideas and principles was accepted reluctantly. It is difficult to tell the story of Unitarianism because it existed under so many names. (We have already noted the term "Socinian" being used.) One reason was that the believers always hoped no separate church would be needed, that a reformation could do the needed task within the existing churches. This hope always delayed a split into a new sect. We shall see later that Channing in America waited until every stone had been turned before building the new association of Unitarian churches. Even today many of the most active members of local churches protest that we are not a sect or denomination, so opposed are they to another evidence of the sectarian spirit. We find throughout the centuries that only when threatened with losing the very heart of their faith, religious toleration and the unity of God, have the Unitarians organized a separate church and made plans to operate independently. One cannot but hope that we will some day learn that without the tools of organized action — buildings, leaders, printing presses and missionary zeal — the spiritual core of one's faith can be lost. Social unity, working together, planning for the future as a group, are disciplines we Unitarians have learned at great cost. Repeated experience has taught us that only with such co-operative action will our fundamental religious values grow and mature.

After the period of the debates Unitarianism knew its "golden age" in Transylvania. It grew in city, town and country. Unitarian refugees from lands of persecution came to serve the new religion. A college, using the buildings of an abandoned Dominican monastery, became the center of learning for the Unitarian faith. The printing press issued eight new works by Francis David. By 1600 there were 425 churches.

In 1571 King John Sigismund died at the age of thirty-one. This great patron of art and science, liberal religion and learning remains in history as one of the most enlightened of monarchs. His name belongs in the company of Akhenaten, Akbar, Marcus Aurelius and Alfred the Great.

With the death of King John Sigismund began a period of increasing hostility to the Unitarian movement, details of which can be found in longer records than this brief chapter. Successors to the King were less friendly, and in Prince Stephen Bathor's reign measures were taken to diminish the popularity of the Unitarian churches. Members of the church were removed from court positions, including David as court preacher. The new King revived an old law forbidding the printing of books without his royal approval. The Unitarian printer was exiled and the press was taken to Peca in Turkey where Unitarian books continued to be published and circulated broadly, converting, we are told, many Calvinists.

A period of weeding out the Unitarians by plots and subterfuges ended in a most tragic episode over a religious issue of secondary importance (whether Christ was to be worshiped as God) in which Biandrata and Faustus Socinus opposed Francis David. David preached his final sermon in the church at Kolozsvar at the end of this bitter struggle, and held to the last that to worship Christ was the same as to invoke the Virgin Mary and the Saints. He ended dramatically with the words: "Whatever the world may say, it must sometime become clear that God is but one."

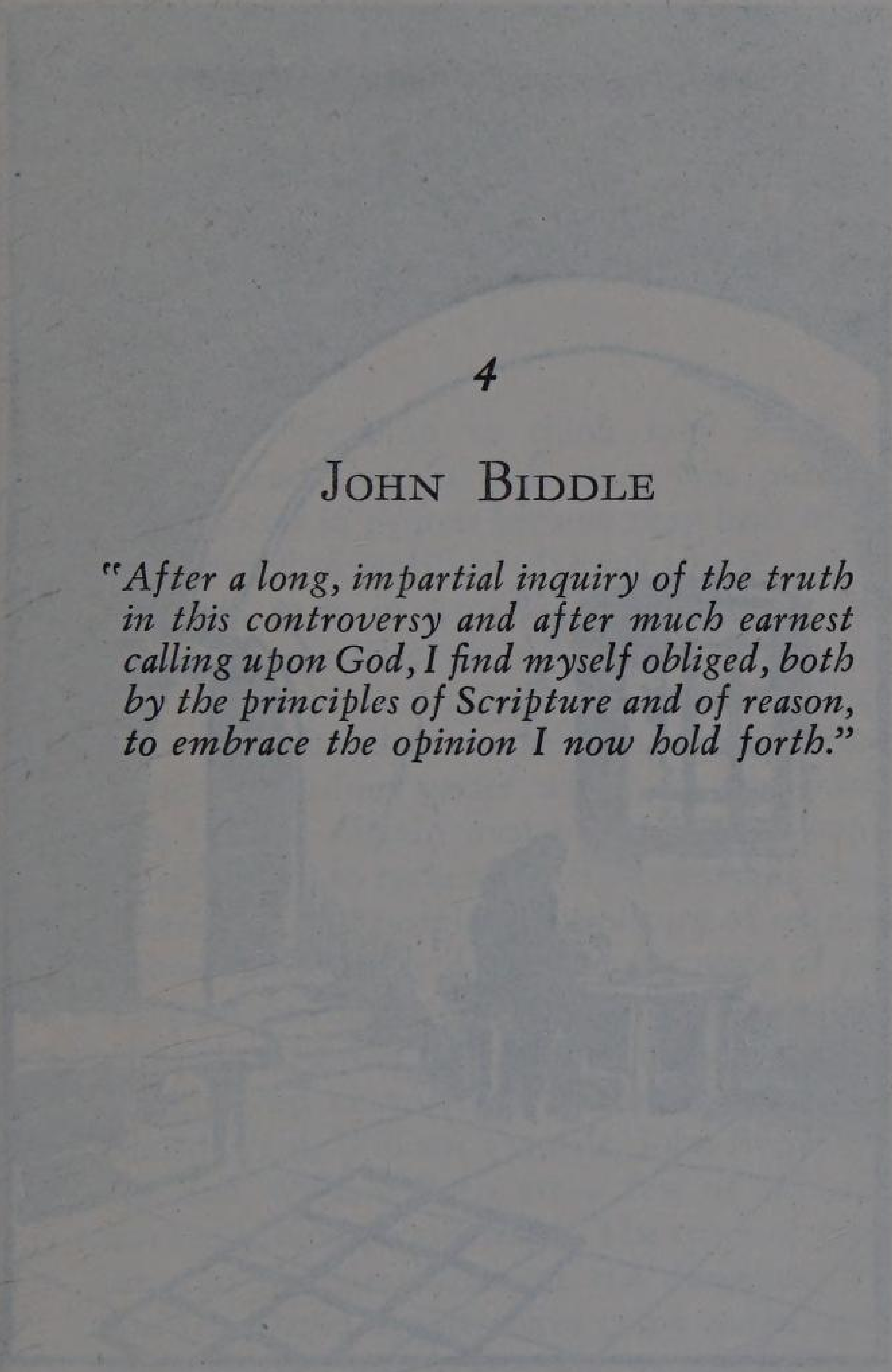
The Prince insisted that Francis David be arrested. After long confinement, David was forced in spite of great weakness to yield himself to an appearance before the Prince. Carried in 1579 to the palace in a wagon, David was accused of teaching illegal "innovations" in preaching that Christ should not be worshiped. The Prince pronounced him guilty and banished him to the castle prison at Deva where he died after a few months.

His Teachings and Significance

It is not for new contributions to the basic Unitarian belief that we honor Francis David so much as it is for his profound spiritual integrity as a man of clear convictions who was beyond bribery, threatenings or fear. He changed his opinions several times when convinced that the Bible and his own reason demanded a change. He would have understood the ugly nature of the modern word *appeasement*, and would have repudiated it as swiftly as have Unitarian ministers in modern Europe in concentration camps.

Francis David taught the unity of God and the imperative necessity for religious toleration in a world of free men. The influence of his example of this principle on kings and commoners, on Catholics, Calvinists and Unitarians, is his great memorial for us. He opposed infant baptism and the worship of Christ. On these and other matters Unitarians have continued to differ; but on the issue of the use of reason and the right to hold differing opinions we have held firmly together as a people ever since his day. His thoroughgoing knowledge of the Bible was his strong support, and won him many of the decisions in his historic debates with Melius, who for all of his learning in theology simply did not know his Bible well enough to answer him.

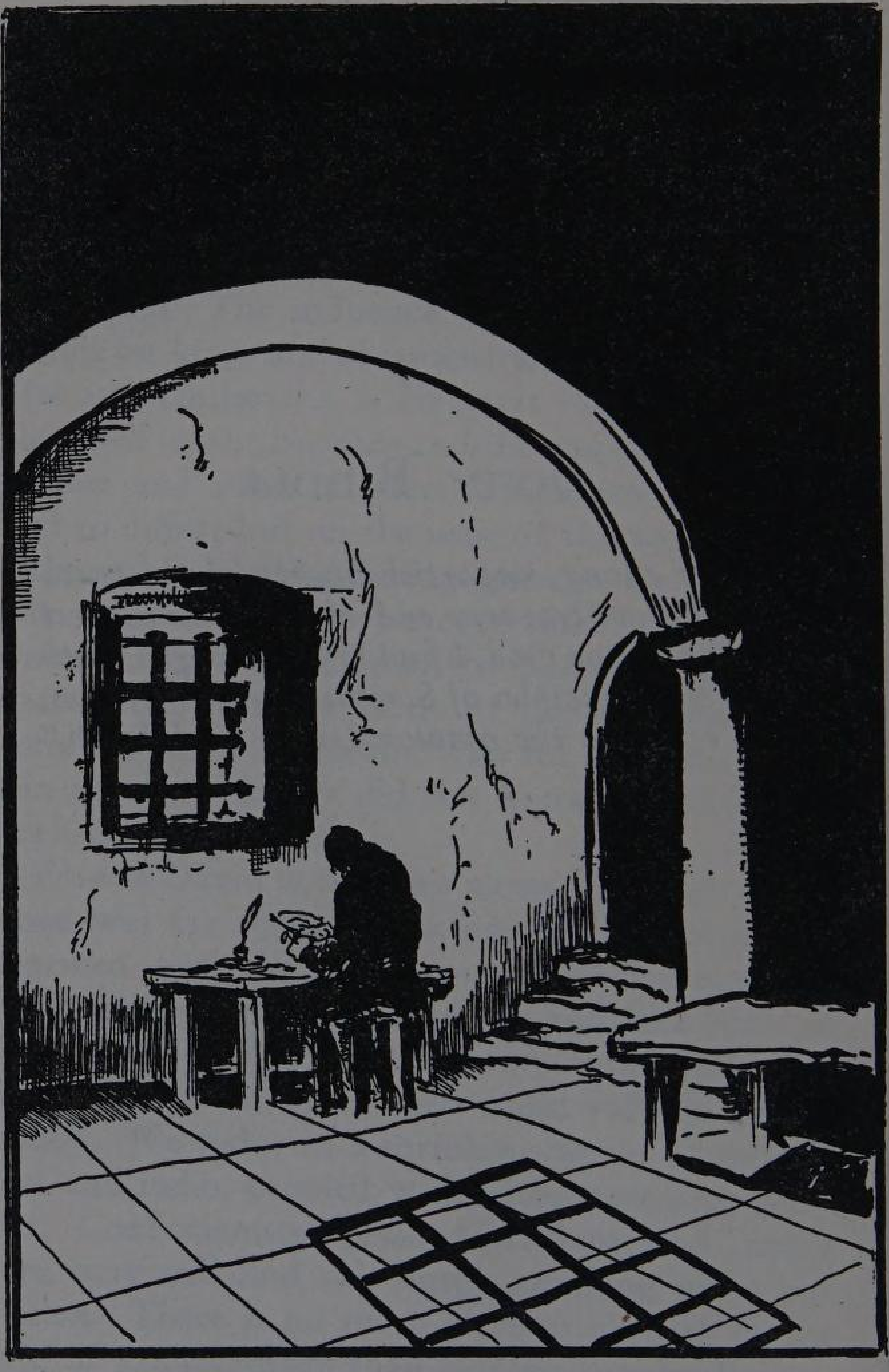
Francis David both in his views and in his steadfastness was far ahead of Socinus and Servetus. He was armed with the moral courage of Servetus and the organizing genius of Socinus, and like both of these men believed completely in the unity of God as a faith around which all men could rally in simple devotion. We today in a shrinking world of mighty planes and radio, peopled with Mohammedans, Buddhists, Confucianists, Jews, Christians and many others, may still find this simple teaching to be our salvation. There is no more glorious chapter in the record of Unitarianism than that written by Francis David, eloquent preacher of the liberal faith.



4

John Biddle

"After a long, impartial inquiry of the truth in this controversy and after much earnest calling upon God, I find myself obliged, both by the principles of Scripture and of reason, to embrace the opinion I now hold forth."



John Biddle's Workshop

4

JOHN BIDDLE

DID you ever stop to think how much of the comfort and freedom you enjoy was purchased by men who sat in prisons because they held convictions they refused to sacrifice? "Going to jail" has so often suggested to us in America a punishment for what the morning newspaper reports as "assault and battery" or "drunken driving" that it rather brings us up short to realize that our religion and the free democratic institutions under which we live came to us only because certain men of flesh and blood "went to jail" never to return. It is a rewarding experience to make a list of people in the history of religion upon whom we are today dependent for some of our most accepted privileges, people who went to prison, and, while there, wrote books which became dynamite for breaking up obstructions to human progress. The Apostle Paul, William Tyndale, John Bunyan, George Fox and William Penn are a few of the men who worked behind prison walls. The story of Unitarianism also includes heroes of the dungeon. Servetus, Socinus, David already have come across our vision, and now we come to one who seemed to live his life within prison walls — John Biddle, the first English Unitarian leader. He lived in Gloucestershire, England, in the seventeenth century. He was the son of a wool merchant, and at the University of Oxford captured the highest honors as a student; but for all that he bore the name "heretic" for his forthright Unitarian views, and as a result went to jail at least five times. His books were burned in the town squares of England by the common hangman more times than one can count in the scattered records of the period.

Unsung Heroes before John Biddle

Before speaking further of John Biddle, who died from starvation in an English prison, it would be well to pause long enough to honor a few of the earlier unsung heroes of the cause of religious liberty we cherish today under the name of Unitarianism. (Of course, it need hardly be stated, there have been scores of magnificent martyrs and spokesmen of liberal religion outside of our own household of faith — Roger Williams, Anne Hutchinson, John Hus, Robert Lockyer, to mention but a few.) It must be kept in mind that many of those who testified to the worship of one God and — even more wicked in the eyes of the magistrates — to the right of reading their English Bibles as they pleased by the light of reason, were as unfamiliar with the word "Unitarian" as a modern chieftain in Zanzibar.

In 1550 Joan Boucher, a lady of Kent, not only read her Bible in the English translation by John Tyndale (an illegal book in those days) but smuggled copies for her friends in court by hiding them in the voluminous folds of her dress.

Unlike less distinguished offenders, she was well protected from the full wrath of the court of King Edward VI — that is, for a time; but eventually Archbishop Cranmer persuaded the King to sign the warrant for her execution. While she was being led to the pile of faggots in Smithfield the ministers urged her to recant. She boldly reminded them that they had changed from Catholicism to Protestantism, and would someday like herself advance to even greater knowledge of the truth. As the minister actually in charge of her execution pleaded with her to renounce her liberal views, she brusquely urged him to light the fire and then return home for a more careful study of his Bible.

Most of the early Unitarians were labeled Arians[1] — the judges using the fourth-century term. There were William Hamont, a plough maker; John Lewis; George Van Parris; Patrick Packingham, a dealer in hides; Francis Ket; Bartholomew Leggatt and Edward Wightman. These last two were burned in 1611, nine years before the Mayflower sailed for America. Most of these died the death because, like Servetus, they read their Bibles too well and used their heads to comprehend what the Bible said. Some of these early martyrs were produced by an extraordinary church in London, chartered in 1550, and known as The Church of the Strangers. It was a Tower of Babel, for its membership consisted of refugees from religious and political persecution in Europe.[2] Italians, Dutchmen, Spaniards, Frenchmen and others gathered here to worship according to the dictates of their consciences — within limits. At one time it had 5,000 members, and branches in eleven provinces. Dr. Wilbur, in his book *Our Unitarian Heritage*, reports that Ochino, who later became a great Italian Unitarian; Cassiodora de Reyna, a disciple of Servetus; and Laelius Socinus, uncle of Faustus Socinus, all worshiped in The Church of the Strangers. As it was protected by the very difficulty of tracing subversive religious thinking in so many languages, and inspired by the give-and-take of religious discussion such a church would inevitably engender, it is not surprising to learn that several martyrs for the "antitrinitarian" cause came from its noble roll of honor. These were individuals who came to the Unitarian position without effecting anything resembling an organized society of believers.

---

[1] See pp. 9-10.

We turn now to John Biddle, who advanced the second step and founded a church and converted followers who survived their teacher.

The Life of John Biddle

So far in our story we have found unfamiliar names — Servetus, Biandrata, Socinus, Sigismund. Now we come to a name as English as plum pudding or roast beef — John Biddle. You may also know it because so many of his clan migrated to Philadelphia with William Penn. The story is told of King Edward VII, on a visit as Prince of Wales to Philadelphia, that he said he understood practically everything about the city — Independence Hall, the Liberty Bell, the famous Rittenhouse Square; "But what," queried the bewildered King, "is a biddle, of which I hear so much?" If he had known his own church history, he would have known that a "biddle" was one of the most stubborn Englishmen ever to grace the Island, the founder of our Unitarian movement there. John Biddle was a giant of the spirit, one of those men who makes us walk more proudly because we share his common clay.

---

[2] The parallel to the work today of *The Unitarian Service Committee*, with its similar role of acting as a sanctuary for Europe's victims of intolerance, is worth noting.

John Biddle was born in 1615 at Wotton-under-Edge, Gloucestershire. Because of his very evident talents as a student, a neighboring nobleman provided a scholarship for John's education at Oxford, where he was graduated in 1638. He returned home and taught in a local school. While at college he studied the New Testament thoroughly, and without any known familiarity with the books by Socinus came to the conclusion that the orthodox teaching about the Trinity was unreasonable. As with Servetus before and Eiriksson later, it was a personal discovery of a spiritual genius on fire for truth.

Not long after his settlement in Gloucester as a teacher, he wrote his opinions under the heavy title *XII Arguments drawn Out of the Scripture: wherein the commonly received Opinion touching the Deity of the Holy Spirit is Clearly and Fully Refuted*. (It was not the fashion in those days to use short titles.) He passed the paper around among his friends and read it before small groups of neighbors. Soon the Parliamentary Commissioners, with ears as sharp as the Dies[3] Committee today for tracking down "unsound" ideas, heard about Biddle's paper and he was imprisoned for the first time. This was in 1647. An earlier writer on this period in Unitarianism expresses his situation well: "This was the beginning of a life passed, with a few short intervals of precarious liberty, almost entirely in dungeons. But neither dungeons nor the prospect of torment and death at the stake made him quail. From the depths of his prison cell he cries out that his persecutors, instead of answering his arguments, 'muddle themselves and everybody else by vain talk about *subsistencies* and *moods* and such like brainsick notions that have neither sense nor sap in them.' "[4]

After entering his cell, Biddle sent his offending manuscript to the printer. Parliament in London felt this was an insult to their collective judgment in jailing him (in which inference they were correct), and ordered the remaining copies burned — as always, by that man made so busy by the early Unitarians, the common hangman. This would have stopped all but a Biddle. For him it was the beginning of a career. He was imprisoned for five years. The book meanwhile flourished, partly because of its novel ideas and partly by the reputation a book secures when banned either legally or by a majority opinion. (Tom Paine, author of *Common Sense* and *The Age of Reason*, discovered this fact about human nature during the American Revolution.) *XII Arguments*, to shorten its title for our present purposes, went into a second edition, and crossing the English Channel found its way into Holland.

---

[3] A Congressional Committee in Washington appointed in 1938, which sought large appropriations for exposing alien and subversive tendencies.

[4] Frederick B. Mott, *A Short History of Unitarianism since the Reformation* (Boston: Unitarian Sunday School Society, 1893), p. 34.

In jail the pen and inkpot were worked hard by Biddle. In 1648 he published *A Confession of Faith Touching the Holy Trinity*. It was not from today's viewpoint an extreme attack on the Trinity. It was rather an effort to "purify" the doctrine. Like Servetus, whom he resembles in his ideas, he said Christ had a human nature only — still he was the Son of God and also God. But the idea of three Gods in one was, he taught, unbiblical and a Catholic corruption. *This is important to note.*

It was not a preoccupation with theology that made men like Biddle and Servetus so courageous and firm in their purpose; it was a desire to open the pathway of Christianity to all men, the uneducated masses of good men and women who found the learned arguments too difficult to understand; so we might add, to a great many good people with college educations down to this present day. We might say in modern vernacular that Biddle protested against theologians' laying hidden land mines in the highway to Christian living.

This new book made such a stir and won so many followers for Biddle that Parliament in desperation passed what has been called "the Draconic Ordinance"[5] (1648) which made the heresy of denying the Trinity or the deity of Christ punishable by death.

Happily for Biddle the law was not stringently enforced immediately and he was released on bail after a time, but not in a chastened mood. He became a preacher in Staffordshire where his preaching soon sent him back to prison at the insistence of the Parliamentary police. Here he was assisted by a small legacy left by an admirer, and later by some proofreading of a new edition of the Bible. (Servetus, it will be recalled, was a proofreader during his progress into Unitarianism.) In 1652 Parliament passed an Act of Oblivion, under which Biddle was released from prison. He took advantage of the period of tolerance on the part of the government to capitalize on the fame his imprisonment had brought him and his views. He went to London and began to hold meetings with people who had read his books.

He conducted Bible classes, which was a radical idea, for this was long prior to the starting of the present-day Sunday School by Robert Raikes. The group continued to meet as long as Biddle lived, even during his periods of later imprisonment. Sometimes they were called *Bidellians*, sometimes Socinians, but they preferred the name Unitarians. This independent society of men and women under John Biddle's strong leadership, supported by his brilliant mind and generous Christian spirit, constitutes the first Unitarian church of English-speaking people. With the establishment of a church devoted to religion interpreted by reason rather than by "revealed doctrine," or church council edicts of faith, we can mark the beginning of the Unitarian church as we know it in England and America.

---

[5] Draco in ancient Sparta passed laws so severe that they became the symbol for all times of rigorous legislation.

Important among the writings of Biddle is *A Two-fold Catechism* (1654) based on the catechism published in Rakow by Socinus. It used the question and answer technique which is the basis of the religious catechism today in many churches. Biddle wrote his catechism for children with the purpose of presenting the basic teachings of Christianity. The answers were in the words of the Bible. Not only the Trinity but other doctrines when treated this way were shown to be at great variance with the Bible. Thus was begun the cause of religious education of children in a more liberal direction.

This new form of making Socinianism known to the plainest mind aroused greater protest than anything Biddle had yet done. A Dutch orthodox scholar published an answer to what he called Biddle's "Socinian Atheism," and another Dutch theologian protested to the English government against its shameless tolerance of such teaching. This stung the pride of the Parliament, who immediately called again for the common hangman and his torch. Again Biddle was arrested and confined, and this time forbidden visitors, paper, pens or ink. His friends never expected to see him alive again, but Parliament dissolved and Biddle was set free before the case was called.

True to his well-demonstrated single-mindedness, John Biddle returned to his London pulpit. So many Baptists were converted from a near-by church that the minister invited Biddle to a debate. The Baptist minister opened the public debate by asking whether anyone present denied that Christ was God. Biddle raised his voice and said he so denied it. He was arrested and soon brought to trial. The Presbyterians attended, bringing with them petitions against Biddle; but the Baptists came with equally long lists of signers on his behalf. Cromwell, the Protector, banished him to the comparative isolation of the Scilly Isles.[6]

Two years later Biddle was allowed to return to London. When the period of the Commonwealth was over and Charles II was restored to the throne, an *Act of Uniformity* was passed which made it a crime to worship under any forms but those of the state church, the Church of England. Biddle and his church members "went underground." Secret meetings were held in private homes. The police found them by means not unlike those used in France and Czechoslovakia under Nazi rule in our own time. Religious liberty was valued highly by these stout forebears of ours. Soon minister and laity alike languished in the London jails. Biddle was fined one hundred pounds, a sum so large in those days that many years would be required to pay it. Filth in the prison and lack of food soon brought Biddle's life to an end. He died in 1662.

---

[6] The famous Protector of England, Oliver Cromwell, was responsible for intervening on Biddle's behalf. Cromwell was not a Unitarian, but he prized religious liberty and his firm hand saved Biddle from possible execution as a heretic. He released him from prison. To appease rival Protestant sects — Presbyterians and Independents — he sent him to the Scilly Isles in banishment. This was a more pleasant punishment than he had previously suffered. Cromwell saw that a pension cared for his physical wants while in exile. Cromwell was a leader of a civil war in England which won religious and political liberties for his people. Some of his followers, called *Levellers*, under men like Overton and Walwyn, sought to win economic freedom also, but the more conservative Cromwell defeated this left-wing party. This should not prevent our appreciation for Cromwell's aid to the cause of religious liberty.

It should be stated very clearly that Biddle was not a fanatic, nor a crank, but rather a deeply devout Christian whose high intelligence convinced him that no progress could be made against the hard resistance of dogmatic clergy and churchmen without complete dedication to the new truth *at any price*. He was not what psychologists today call an exhibitionist, one who enjoys the spotlight of attention for vanity's sake. This is clearly seen in his statement published after his death: "What shall befall me in the pursuance of this work I refer to the disposal of the all-wise God, whose glory is dearer to me not only than liberty but than my life." These are not empty words; for he proved that he meant them by years in unspeakable prisons, and death by slow starvation. They are words of a human soul dedicated to spiritual freedom.

Biddle's Influence after His Death

One small church in London was not enough to reach the people coming to Unitarian convictions in the seventeenth century. John Milton, author of *The Liberty of Prophesying;* John Locke, author of the *Essay concerning Human Understanding* and *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, England's leading thinker; Sir Isaac Newton, who discovered the law of gravity; Lord Herbert of Cherbury, author of *About the Truth,* were all isolated Unitarians of the period. So also was William Penn, who wrote a book, *The Sandy Foundation Shaken,* which was a strong protest against the Trinity. He founded the American branch of the Quaker sect, which to this day has a Hicksite wing firmly Unitarian and independent in its religious thinking.

A footnote should be written to the story of John Biddle; for it represents his power as a leader even after his tragic death at the age of forty-seven. It is about the work of his leading Unitarian layman in London, Thomas Firmin, a wealthy manufacturer of cloth, who was far ahead of his day in a sense of responsibility for the welfare of the people. He not only financially supported Biddle in some of the more desperate periods of his career, but also secured the pension from Cromwell during the banishment on the Scilly Isles. He raised funds from other Englishmen to care for Unitarian exiles from Poland during the dark period of their suffering as well as for Orthodox Protestants from Poland who had to flee in 1681, and for Huguenot refugees from France in the same year.

After the great Fire of London in 1666 he established a warehouse where coal and grain were sold at cost. Opposing charity as injurious to human dignity when there was a better way open, Thomas Firmin set up factories where hundreds of the fire victims wove linen and woolen cloth, thus probably establishing one of the earliest precedents for *work relief* which England and America developed under more efficient government auspices during the depression years of the thirties in our own century. He indulged in social planning, evolving scientific employment arrangements for the poor, established prison plans, and made early experiments in case work with the destitute and ill. This tradition of independent religious thinking, combined with the practical planning of social institutions to serve people's material welfare, later became associated with Unitarianism, as we shall have occasion to note in later chapters. Firmin also believed in the efficacy of the printing press, and after Biddle's death published at his own expense works by Socinus and Biddle, and arranged for Stephen Nye in 1687 to write *A History of Unitarians (Also called Socinians)*.

This brief note about a great lay Unitarian, Thomas Firmin, is an appropriate closing comment on the life of John Biddle, the stubborn and inspired preacher of Unitarian ideas and organization. The test of religion is not doctrinal, but lies in the kind of men produced by it. Firmin was but one of several "case studies" we might report if space permitted. Biddle could have held his peace and been "a Unitarian in his closet" as were thousands of ministers of his time.

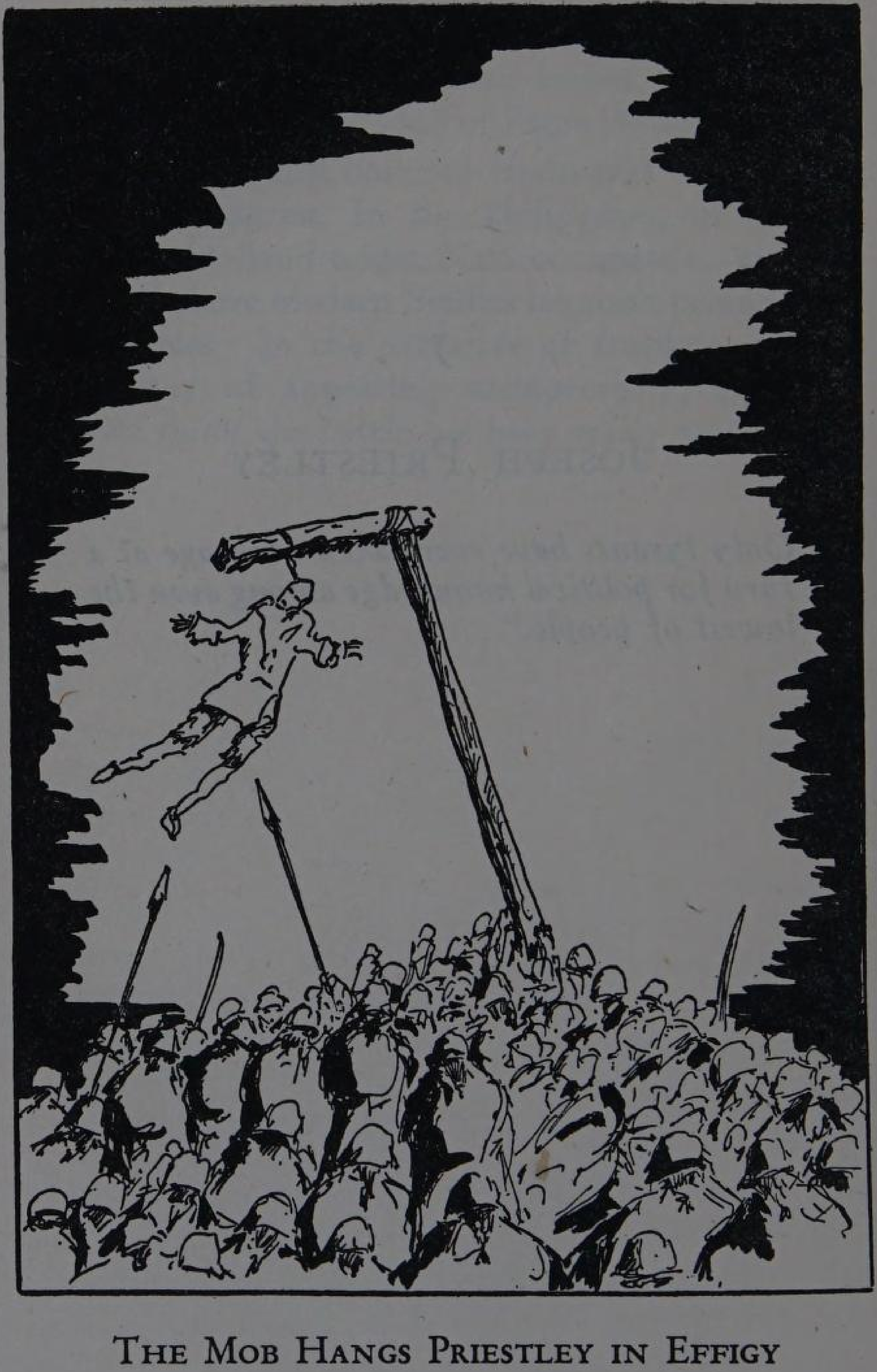
If he had chosen this path there would have been no spread of liberal Christianity, no catechism for children, no "First Church of London," no inking of the rollers of the printing presses, no ardent Mr. Firmin gaining new faith in his fellow men with the resulting enlightenment of their minds and improvement of the condition of their bodies. John Biddle won his position in our Hall of Fame the hard way.

Prisons are still honored landmarks on the road to human progress. In the Philippines, in Central Europe, in Holland under Nazi occupation, we have reason to believe modern Biddles languish behind electrified fences. In the narrative of freedom, prisons have a way of appearing unexpectedly, especially when we think the battle has been safely won.

5

JOSEPH PRIESTLEY

"Only tyrants have ever taken umbrage at a turn for political knowledge among even the lowest of people."



THE MOB HANGS PRIESTLEY IN EFFIGY

5

JOSEPH PRIESTLEY

FROM the burning of the library at Alexandria, Egypt, in 640 A.D., by the Calif Omar, until our own times in Germany, men have sought to stamp out ideas with fire, never learning that "crime does not pay" but that ideas so treated simply multiply the more.

The great English scientist who discovered oxygen, Joseph Priestley, had the experience of seeing his library, one of the finest scientific and theological libraries in the eighteenth century, go up in flames along with all his other possessions, including his home, in a fire set by men who had not learned this simple lesson of history. You cannot burn ideas as you burn wood and paper; they are not inflammable; they survive uninjured the hottest temperatures.

On July 14, 1791, the greatest book-burning in Unitarian history (and we have noted several previous conflagrations in these pages) occurred in Birmingham, England. It is a memorable date for the development of our cause, as we shall see later. Illiberal Church of England leaders, bitterly enraged at the popularity of Joseph Priestley's Unitarian teachings (for he was a preacher as well as a scientist), plotted with great thoroughness the now famous "riots" in which hundreds of citizens burned meetinghouses, private homes, Priestley's laboratory, apparatus and library. As in the case of the famous Reichstag fire in 1933 in Berlin, which brought Hitler into power, exceedingly clever men sought to give the impression that the trouble was started by others than themselves. History has exposed them in both cases. Not the blind fury of a "mob," or "the ignorance of the masses," planned and perpetrated the Birmingham fire, but well-trained and carefully instructed leaders. This we learn from court records.

The police did not interfere until after three days of pillage, and then only when forced to act by "the national guard" sent in from a distance, after a hundred houses were looted, burned and left in smoking ruins. The clergyman who plotted the so-called riot was not long after made a bishop. Out of several thousand rioters, only twenty were brought to trial — a trial which was a travesty on justice. Six prisoners, all with criminal records, were found guilty, and two of these escaped punishment. Because Dr. Priestley had been a long time supporter of the French Revolution and the principle of a people's government underlying it, the conservative church party which "planted" the fire and riots took occasion to ruin Priestley's reputation in England by calling him a dangerous radical bent upon overthrowing the King and the Church, *especially the Church*. The pattern of calling a liberal leader with a growing following among the people a "Red" is so familiar to us that the whole event seems almost like front-page news, even though it happened 152 years ago.

Priestley in many ways is the most nearly contemporary Unitarian we shall meet in this story, in spite of the century and a half which separates him from ourselves. He was as profoundly religious and dedicated a liberal Christian as could be found. He contributed so much to the science of chemistry that in spite of his religious views the Royal Academy of Science made him a member.[1] He was so devoted to what we today call responsible citizenship, both at home and abroad, that he was made an honorary member of the French Republic, and appointed to a seat in their National Assembly. He was so much an organizer, in our modern use of the term, that when conservative opinion in England forced him into exile he came to America and started at least two Unitarian churches, one of which is still active in Philadelphia. In addition to all of this amazing activity he left behind him from his own pen twenty-five volumes of theological and scientific works. Our modern news magazines would undoubtedly have called him "the man of the year."

The Life of Joseph Priestley

Joseph Priestley was born at Fieldhead, near Leeds, England, in 1733, and like John Biddle was the son of a clothmaker. He was brought up by an aunt after the death of his mother in 1739. The aunt was an extremely devout Calvinist. She was responsible for his good schooling. Being of fragile health he studied and read more than the average boy. By his early teens he had learned Hebrew, Greek and Latin. At eleven his scientific interest led him to observe the breathing apparatus of spiders.

---

[1] Not least in his practical legacy to our age is carbonated water, the basis of all the "colas," sodas and soft drinks Americans cherish so dearly.

At eighteen he sought church membership, but was refused by the Independent (Calvinist) Church because he would not state that he shared Adam's sin, a doctrine which symbolized a contempt for human nature he could not feel. He refused to go to London to a boys' school which was orthodox in its religious views, being now convinced that the Calvinist creed was impossible for his conscience. So he went to a new school at Daventry and was the first student. Daventry was what we today call a "progressive" school, which encouraged the honest exchange of opinion by the students. Priestley came down on the liberal side nearly every time. Here he prepared for the ministry.

There were no Unitarian churches yet in England, but ferment was taking place in both the Church of England and in the Presbyterian churches. Priestley became minister of a Presbyterian congregation, Needham Market Church in Suffolk in 1755, at a salary of thirty pounds a year. To supplement his salary he taught eight to ten hours a day. His first church was a difficult assignment, for Priestley had a tendency to stammer; and even worse, his dropping of one after another of the cherished orthodox beliefs alienated him from the pewholders. After three years, he found a more liberal church in Cheshire, though he still taught six days a week to make ends meet. He earned enough to purchase scientific apparatus for continued experiments. Three years later he became a teacher in a new liberal academy at Warrington, where his colleagues were Arians[2] like himself. He published several scientific books, one of which led the University of Edinburgh to award him the degree of doctor of laws. In London he met Benjamin Franklin, who encouraged him to write a *History of Electricity*. This won him the high honor of being elected a fellow of the Royal Society, England's association of top-ranking scientists, which later added the special honor of a gold medal struck off because of Priestley's contributions to chemistry.

In 1767 Priestley, who always put his profession of preaching ahead of his science, accepted a call to the Mill Hill Chapel at Leeds, the largest "dissenting" chapel in the north of England. (Dissenters were all Protestants not in the state church, the Church of England. Their churches were required to be called "chapels," the dignified term "church" being reserved for the established state congregations.)

Priestley had improved his speech so that he stammered very little. He discovered that many of his parishioners had begun to slip away into the Methodist chapels then flourishing in England under the leadership of John Wesley. Priestley wrote a tract — that is, a short, cheap pamphlet — urging them to be true to their convictions and not to be carried away by the emotional appeals of the Methodists. Thirty thousand copies were circulated. It made a great stir throughout England and also unified his congregation. He began to write books on Unitarianism. At this time he enjoyed the friendship of Theophilus Lindsey, who became his partner in organizing Unitarians as a permanent movement in England, and of whom we shall say more at the end of this chapter.

---

[2] See pp. 9-10.

While he was very busy as a minister — visiting, teaching his young people, writing sermons and books — he continued his studies in chemistry, of which science he was one of the modern founders. Six years after coming to Leeds he accepted a position as literary companion to a wealthy patron of the arts and sciences (a custom in England tracing back to pre-Elizabethan days). Lord Shelburne, who made the offer, assured Priestley of a large salary and leisure for study, experiment and travel. In Europe he met the leaders in many fields of science. His name became paralleled with that of Franklin in the study of electricity. His discovery of oxygen came during this period.

Priestley became deeply interested in the American Revolution, siding with the Colonies against the British Government. His interest in political equality and its relationship to religious freedom dates from this period. His patron, Lord Shelburne, was not in sympathy with Priestley's pro-Revolutionary views, so the relationship ended and in 1780 we find Priestley minister of the New Meeting at Birmingham, England. It was a very liberal church, attended by many distinguished men. In 1782 he published his *History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, which became known all over Europe, and twelve months after its publication was burned (as you may already have guessed) by the common hangman in Dort, Holland. Four years later he published *The History of Early Opinions concerning Jesus Christ.* Previous Unitarians we have discussed stopped with the simple statement that the early Christian church was not trinitarian but Arian. Priestley went further and said that the earliest teaching about Jesus was purely Unitarian, that is that Jesus was one of our own humanity, not God, and should not be worshiped.

His ministry at Birmingham marks the beginning of his leadership of Unitarian ideas against all foes, both within the Church of England and in the dissenting churches, especially the Presbyterian church out of which he came. While the Presbyterians were more tolerant of independent convictions and less inclined toward heresy hunting than the "established" Anglican churchmen, even they urged caution and a policy of stepping softly lest trouble start. And start it did. His zeal, forthrightness and talent made him an able missionary. His fame as a scientist popularized his views as a Unitarian. Orthodox leaders became alarmed at the growing enthusiasm for Unitarian views among both clergy and people.

In the Church of England Archdeacon Horsley waged the struggle against Priestley. He defamed the name of the great scientist all over England, and effectively prevented many transfers of members from Anglican to Unitarian-thinking, dissenting churches during the period.

In the Presbyterian churches Priestley's influence was more successful. He insisted they face their religious ideas honestly and be not afraid of their shadows. He showed many of them that they had already given up many Calvinist ideas — the Trinity, the deity of Christ, and others. When this hurdle was cleared, the good Presbyterian elders balked at the idea of starting a new sect, a reluctance we have noted often before. They insisted upon using the term "Presbyterian" even after many of them became fully Unitarian in their views. This resolute clinging to the old name still persists in some of our churches, notably in Ireland, where they call themselves *Non-subscribing Presbyterians* (which does *not* mean they do not subscribe to the church budget, as you might think, but that they do not subscribe to orthodox *creeds* like other Presbyterians).

As we have noted, Priestley did not try to keep religion out of life, but rather showed its relationship to all other human affairs. For example, he appealed to Parliament to repeal certain restrictive acts passed in 1662 (the Corporation Act, the Test Act and the Five Mile Act). These acts, passed a century before, made it illegal for a dissenter to hold any municipal or government office; or, if he were a minister, to hold meetings or come within five miles of his old church. They were one of the dark stains in English history: 60,000 persons suffered punishment during the twenty-seven years following the enactment of the restrictive religious laws, including 8,000 who died in prison for conscience's sake; $10,000,000 worth of church property was taken from the dissenters (often called "nonconformists"). From this resolute company of nonconformists most of the English Unitarians came later. Priestley sought repeal of these cruel laws, which kept good citizens out of office.[3] To be sure, they were not enforced as they once had been; still dissenters held office only under humiliating terms and always with the knowledge that a legal sword hung over their heads — a knowledge which often kept them from being the bold leaders they might want to be. Priestley believed the government was in a liberal mood, so he sought action.

This statesmanlike proposal to bring the law in line with enlightened public conscience became the occasion for an all-out campaign on the part of the Church of England conservatives to "liquidate" Joseph Priestley. They very nearly succeeded. The acts were not repealed, we might observe now, until 1828, twenty-four years after the death of Priestley.

The legislation proposed by Priestley was thrice defeated in Parliament, but, as Dr. Wilbur states clearly in *Our Unitarian Heritage*, "the attempt [to pass the legislation] was abandoned but the High Church party could not be appeased." We might quietly observe that we can understand that sentence, for in our own time we have discovered that appeasement does not pay.

We now come to the crowning act of infamy against Priestley — the burning of churches, homes and laboratory at the instigation of the Anglican conservatives. They looked across the Channel and saw revolutionaries in France not only taking power in order to give the people bread and work, but also overthrowing the established French church; and these churchmen trembled lest the ideas in France might be contagious. Certainly, they figured, they could accuse Dr. Priestley of being a subversive influence. By such logic they whipped up resentment against the Unitarian leader. They chose July 14, because on that day many liberals in England were meeting to honor Bastille Day, the anniversary of the French Revolution. Some violence might teach them a few lessons.

---

[3] The parallel to "grandfather laws" and similar acts in southern states in the United States after the Civil War, to prevent Negroes from exercising civil rights of voting and holding office, could be drawn here. Both were restrictive efforts to keep thousands of citizens from participation in political activities.

The crowd had been propagandized for months against the "radical" dissenters, especially the Unitarians, and with the quiet leadership of high-ranking church officials (at home behind closed shutters) the underworld hirelings carried out the arrangements described at the beginning of our chapter.

Priestley never dared to return to Birmingham for fear of his life. For three years he preached in Hackney, teaching theology in a college not far away. Some friends sent money and letters of sympathy from various parts of the world, but in London, of which Hackney is a part, he was treated as an outcast. Fearing reprisals, even servants dared not accept employment in his home. Friends passed him on the street; threats to his security reached him.

One of his friends was imprisoned and sent into exile. This helped Priestley to make up his mind to migrate to America, for he knew from his reading of Unitarian and other history that prison is a restrictive residence if one has work to do. So in 1794 we find him on the Atlantic, headed for America.

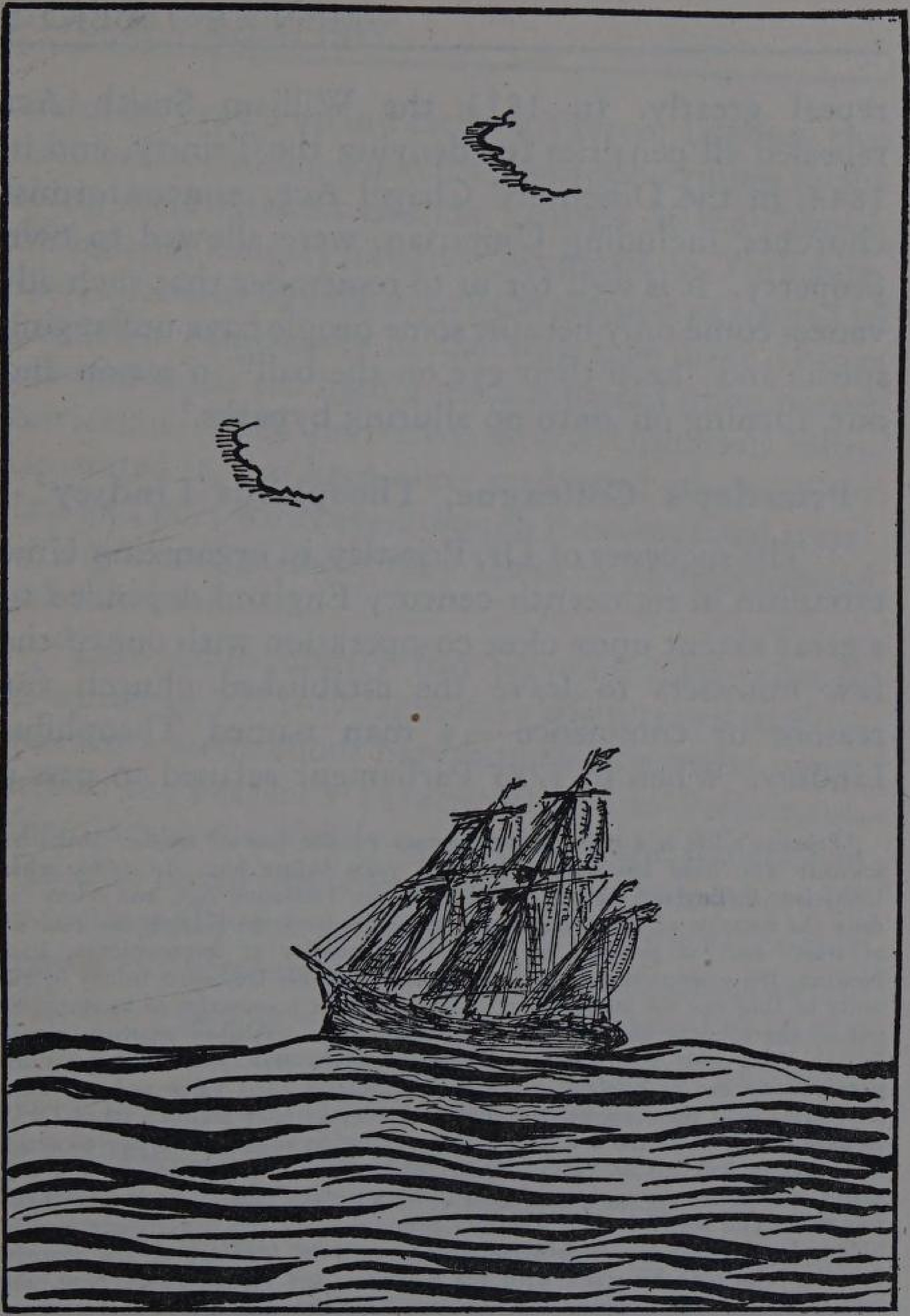
The final chapter was a happy one in spite of continuous newspaper and pulpit slanders in his new home. He had grown tough in his previous encounters and knew that a clear conscience must be part of one's spiritual armor if the liberal faith is to survive. Today the heroism of living Unitarians under even more brutal punishment confirms Priestley's experience. Fellow Unitarians here welcomed the distinguished theologian and scientist. President Adams and later President Jefferson, both Unitarians, as well as Benjamin Franklin, who had attended the Essex Street Unitarian meeting regularly in London, made Priestley feel he was among friends in the new world. He settled in Northumberland, Pennsylvania, where a new community was projected — one of many plans for communal living. The community never materialized, but Priestley organized a Unitarian church there and later one in Philadelphia. His sons had come several years before, and with them he lived happily. He still carried on scientific experiments. While men — usually clergymen, one regrets to admit — continued to volunteer to burn both Priestley and his books on a common bonfire, the abuse abated from its former fury and he died a free man and an honored one in 1804. So ended the life of one whom Thomas Huxley, the great teacher of evolution a century later, called "a heretic and yet a saint."

The Significance of Priestley's Life

Priestley possessed an exploring and courageous mind. He could not understand compromise or mental reservations in any field of thought, least of all religion. Today we remember him for his contributions to chemistry, and for his indefatigable labors on behalf of a free, modern religious movement in the Christian tradition. When we study his specific beliefs we find a curious mixture of some ideas still considered "advanced" and others long since abandoned by a majority of Unitarians.

He believed Jesus was born like all other children and not under miraculous circumstances; but he also believed in the New Testament miracles. He rejected the Trinity, the deity of Jesus and the doctrine of Original Sin; but he believed in the second coming of Christ to this earth, and in the fulfillment of many Old Testament prophecies. As a good scientist he felt the soul was clearly a part of our physical body; yet he also expected God at some far-off time of judgment to restore every soul to life by the passage of a miracle. He clearly believed in monarchy; yet understood far better than the majority of his contemporaries the necessity for democratic participation in government by the people if the ends of equality and justice were to be served.

Priestley was a paradox; but on human issues (in distinction from some doctrinal issues) he nearly always came out on the liberal side. His energetic and practical efforts to repeal the century-old laws against dissenters mentioned above advanced the date of their



Priestley and Unitarianism Sail for America repeal greatly. In 1813 the William Smith Act repealed all penalties for denying the Trinity, and in 1844, in the Dissenters' Chapel Act, nonconformist churches, including Unitarian, were allowed to own property. It is well for us to remember that such advances come only because some people have unflagging spirits and "keep their eye on the ball" in season and out, turning off onto no alluring bypaths.[4]

Priestley's Colleague, Theophilus Lindsey[5]

The successes of Dr. Priestley in organizing Unitarianism in eighteenth-century England depended to a great extent upon close co-operation with one of the few ministers to leave the established church for reasons of conscience — a man named Theophilus Lindsey. When in 1775 Parliament refused to pass a resolution drawn up in Feather's Tavern, London, two years before, asking for relief from subscribing to the Thirty-nine Articles and the Liturgy of the Church of England, Lindsey resigned his parish in Yorkshire. All of the other 250 signers of the petition explained to their own consciences in the way men have always followed when too high a price is placed upon honest conviction. They preferred, as one Unitarian historian stated it, "to keep their cushioned chairs, silver plate and port wine, even though it necessitated wearing a spiritual garment they knew to be embroidered with falsehood."[6]

---

[4] Priestley's life is a striking commentary on the fate of another Unitarian scientist who lived less than a hundred years before him. In 1690, when Unitarians in England were excluded from the Toleration Act, and when "to deny the doctrine of the Trinity . . . prevented one from holding any position of trust" and "if persisted in" carried the penalty of imprisonment, Isaac Newton, the greatest mind of his time, set down his Unitarian beliefs in the unity of God and the humanity of Jesus in a secret manuscript to be smuggled out of the country and into Holland, there to be published anonymously in French. The other great Unitarian scientist of that age, John Locke, got the papers safely out of England, since he "appreciated their value and was most anxious to have them published." But a few weeks later Newton asked Locke to have the work on the translation and publication stopped, in order to avoid, as his biographer tells us, "actual danger to his position and liberty." It is well worth our noting the century of growth between the time of Locke and Newton, when two world-famous scientists were anxiously and dangerously playing hide-and-seek with the established powers, and the new age of the scientist Priestley who took his stand with the American and French Revolutions, and who spoke his mind openly in the very face of persecution. See Louis Trenchard Moore, *Isaac Newton, a Biography* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), pp. 632, 633, 636, 643-644.

[5] This section can be omitted in courses of study if desired, but it supplies information essential to any chronological history of the Unitarian movement in Great Britain.

Theophilus Lindsey had traveled 2000 miles in the winter of 1771–1772, in days when travel in England was a tremendous hardship, to secure the signatures to the Feather's Tavern petition to Parliament. When it was completely rejected and the signers had refused to resign their churches in protest or otherwise act concertedly for reform, Lindsey, with quiet but magnificent heroism, preached a final sermon, rejected the Bishop's plea to stay and "do good works," sold the family silver and his cherished library, and set out with twenty pounds in his purse for the city of London. It is a stirring story and represents one of the memorable personal decisions in Unitarian history. He had a conscience to live with, and there was no room in it for the Thirty-nine Articles (based on the Athanasian Creed); so out went the Articles, as well as his means of livelihood.

---

[6] Mott, p. 39.

In 1778 he established a meetinghouse under the Unitarian name in Essex Street, over an old auction room. For twenty years he preached the liberal gospel without fear or favor and with much quiet power from this Essex Street church. He lived in a drab tenement in Holborn, and not one of their former church friends, according to letters of the period, visited him and his wife in these first lonely and uncertain years.

But new friends did appear. The venture became a glorious success. Joseph Priestley became his lifelong friend, and together they planned many activities to advance the cause. Benjamin Franklin, Dr. Richard Price (one of the leading mathematicians of the age and another early supporter of the French Revolution), and others began to come, including scientists, physicians and members of Parliament. For many months at the beginning of this Second Unitarian Church (considering John Biddle's now defunct Church as the First) the government sent an "emissary" to take notes on all that was said and done. Like Priestley, Lindsey believed in active civic responsibility, and his example — like Firmin's a century before — helped to establish the tradition of humanitarianism in our Unitarian churches. He supported the American and French Revolutions, and opposed the slave trade long before it became an issue in America.

By the time of Lindsey's death in 1808 there were a score of churches that had adopted the Unitarian name. It must be remembered that one reason few Unitarian churches organized, considering the popular interest and support for the ideas of our faith, was the threat of the "sleeping" laws on the books of Parliament. Not until the nineteenth century under Thomas Belsham did new churches organize and join into a federation.

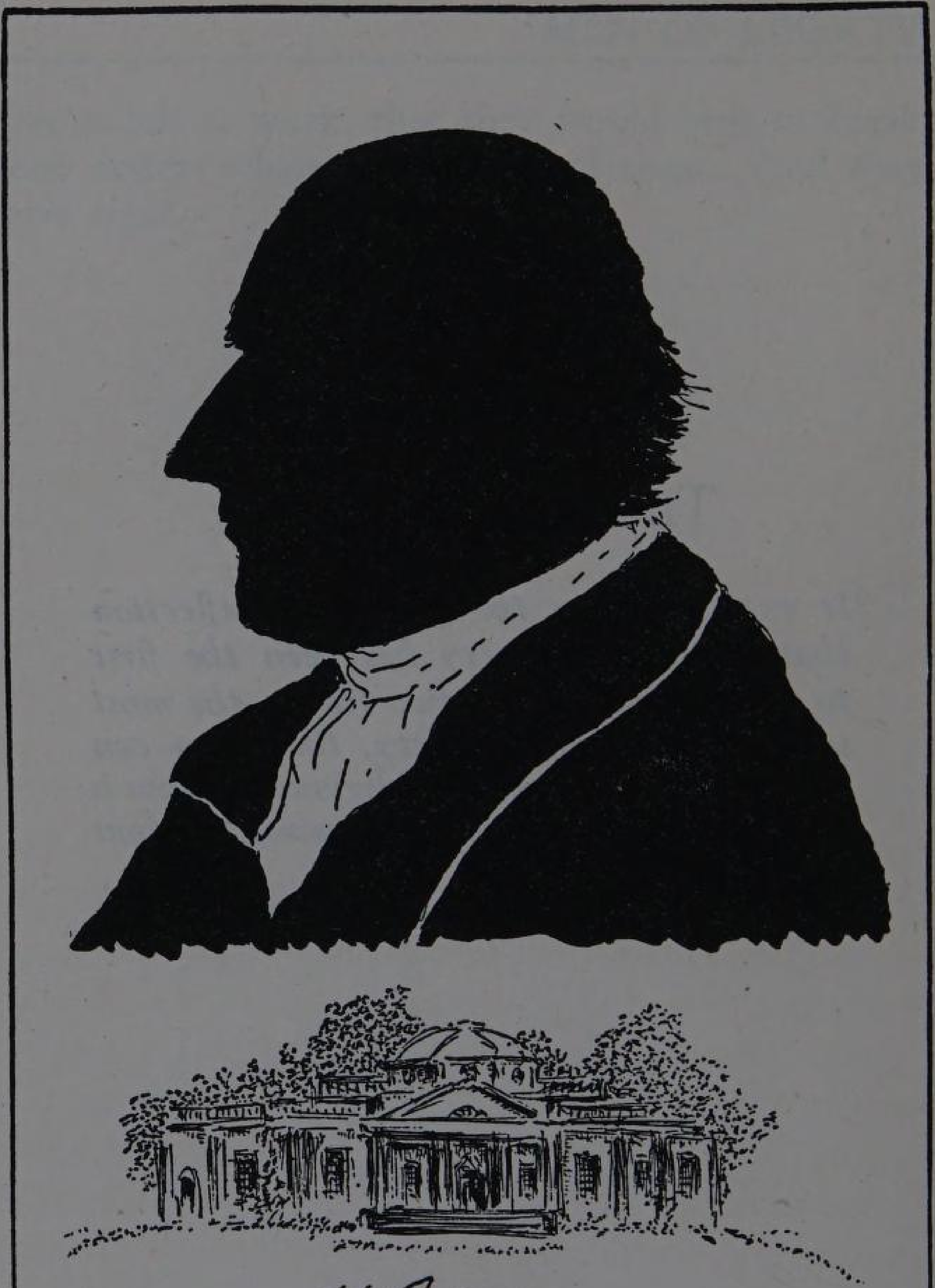
In summary, this English period stands in our minds today as a great time of advancement for the liberal faith. From Joan Boucher to Theophilus Lindsey, the story is one of an ever-mounting desire for religious freedom. The human mind craved the right to think for itself even under threat of persecution by priest and king. These liberty-loving Englishmen under many sectarian names were insisting upon the worship of a God at least as good as the best that man knows of moral goodness, not a God resembling the tyrant master of a slave ship. The arbitrary and contemptuous God of John Calvin failed to raise admiration and devotion in men like John Biddle, Theophilus Lindsey and Joseph Priestley.

From the beginning, the issue centered around the right to read the Bible privately at home beside a tallow candle, without a priest interpreting over one's shoulder. The issue was fundamental. The kings and bishops knew that if a man could read his Bible freely he would be an unshackled man, that it would lead, as Jefferson phrased it later in Virginia, to "a crusade against ignorance," not only against religious ignorance, but against political, medical and economic ignorance as well. Bishop Cranmer and Archdeacon Horsley were troubled not only about decreasing enthusiasm for the Trinity; they instinctively knew that Bible-reading commoners would become men with free minds at work, that they would seek to break their fetters wherever they found them. *And they were right.*

6

THOMAS JEFFERSON

"It excites in me the gratifying reflection that my own country has been the first to prove to the world two truths, the most salutary to human society, that man can govern himself, and that religious freedom is the most effectual anodyne against religious dissention."


Th: Jefferson

THOMAS JEFFERSON

6

THOMAS JEFFERSON[1]

IF you should today (September, 1943) visit the city of Washington and go to the Library of Congress to see the original manuscript of the Declaration of Independence preserved under its yellow mask of special glass, you would find it missing. The most cherished piece of paper in America has been placed in hiding for the duration. We all breathe a little easier to know its safety is assured from bomb or thief. And we know it will come back for millions to visit in years to come. Meanwhile, we remember the words especially "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

The young man of thirty-three years who penned those words was the most public figure who frankly called himself Unitarian—a Virginia plantation owner named Thomas Jefferson. The document he wrote on July 2nd without a book or pamphlet around him has not only stirred the hearts of countless millions in America but gave revolutionary courage to men and women in France, in Greece and Italy, in

---

[1] If this book is used in a course of study it would be well to devote two sessions to this longer chapter. The break can be made at "Jefferson's Applied Religion," p. 95. The life of Jefferson is so familiar that no summary is offered here. Two readable recent biographies are *Jefferson Himself* by Bernard Mayo (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1942) and *Thomas Jefferson* by Hendrik W. van Loon (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1943).

Russia, India and Germany during the years that followed the establishment of our own Republic. Only in recent years have scholars told us many of the details about this charter of our liberties — little details and major ones. Two of them belong here, for they have to do with the searching conscience of Thomas Jefferson, with his deathless concentration on the freedom of mankind.

Scores of men wrote revolutionary pamphlets in the eighteenth century, and often spoke of the natural rights of man: life, liberty and property. James Otis, John Locke, and many other writers had used the phrase; but when Thomas Jefferson penned his manifesto for Americans something new was added — for *property* he substituted *the pursuit of happiness*. With the substitution history turned a corner and started in a new direction, toward what Vice-President Wallace in our own time has called "the century of the common man." If all else were forgotten about this first paper of American independence none of us should ever forget that to its author *human rights come first*. For them men died at Brandywine and Trenton. Not property, but the pursuit of happiness, gave a backbone to the Revolution. The substitution was not challenged on the floor of the Continental Congress, though the blue pencil struck at other passages and deleted them.

The second important detail few of our history books have told us about the Declaration was the omission of the paragraph on slavery. In the original draft written by Jefferson, the youthful chairman of the drafting committee, the indictment of King George III included censure for continuing the slave trade to America.[2] The readers of these pages know quite well the costliness of this decision by the timid delegates to the Continental Congress. Appeasement of Georgia and South Carolina in 1776 over the protest of Jefferson ended in bloodshed at Elijah Lovejoy's print shop at Alton, Illinois, on the plains of "bleeding Kansas," at Harpers Ferry, and finally in the wholesale slaughter of the Civil War itself, ending on the fields of Gettysburg. With these two recently discovered facts in mind, it would be a good idea to reread the Declaration once a year, just to keep its words unrusted in our minds.

The Hero of a "Ballad for Americans"

A few days ago the author heard the great Negro baritone, Paul Robeson, sing a song entitled "Ballad for Americans" which, among other things, pays enthusiastic tribute to our multiple religious faiths here in the United States. When Robeson's deep baritone sings these words about the Methodists, Jews, atheists, Catholics and "lots besides," one thinks that Thomas Jefferson would have understood the meaning of the song. For Jefferson does not belong to marble monuments, however beautiful; he belongs to the people now alive. As Jefferson himself declared: "The earth belongs to the living generation." This man Jefferson is not as familiar to us as you may suppose. If you think you know the story of Jefferson from your history books, just take a red pencil and check in this chapter the new facts and ideas about him you find. You may be surprised. The reason is not because this is a report of scholarly discovery (it is not) but because his life has been more censored in the telling than that of any other American. As one biographer suggested: "The hostility of his enemies has taken the peculiar form of editing his works or writing his life."

---

[2] The deleted paragraph reads: "He has waged cruel war against human nature itself. Violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people, who never offended him, captivating them and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither, this piratical warfare, the opprobrium of *infidel* powers, is the warfare of the *Christian* King of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or restrain this execrable commerce."

Only in recent times, as we celebrate the 200th anniversary of his birth, have the masses of the American people really found the man who did more than any other single person to plan their house of freedom and sketch the blueprints for many of its great foundations. *The Patriots* by Sidney Kingsley plays to a crowded theatre on Broadway; Hendrik van Loon, Bernard Mayo and Marie Kimball have written new lives selling by the tens of thousands. Radio programs and special movies begin to show us that he was not only President a century and a half ago, but also for all of us today the hero of a "Ballad for Americans."

Jefferson is included in this volume not simply because he was a Unitarian theologically,[3] but because he did more than any one man in our history to advance the cause of religious freedom, and because his definition of religion included firm loyalty to all battles for human progress. He took religion out of shrine and chapel, creed and ritual, and made it live in the marketplace, the schoolroom, the Congressional chamber, on the farm, and everywhere that men work and rest.

---

[3] As Thomas Jefferson strides across the Virginia hills waging warfare for the rights of man, we can see how important the layman is in religion. No frocked

In trying to find out about any man's religion we have two sources — what he said and did specifically on that subject, and even more important what he did to incorporate his religious ideals into every corner of his life and world. We shall begin with the first. Happily, unlike today, great men in the eighteenth century recorded their opinions and deeds very carefully. They kept commonplace books (notebooks of their thoughts and observations). They wrote many books (Jefferson's collected papers fill twenty-one volumes). They kept elaborate diaries. We do not

---

clergyman, no mitred bishop, but a layman carries off top honors for the thrust of liberal religion into the life of our nation. Jefferson belongs to every American, of every racial heritage, of every nationality long or lately come to these free shores, of every faith that welcomes brotherhood; and it is in no label-pinning mood of small possessiveness that we claim him here. His allegiance to the Unitarian cause came from conviction, and he hoped the principles of free religion would be shared by millions at an early time. "Had the doctrines of Jesus been preached always as pure as they came from his lips, the whole civilized world would now have been Christian. I rejoice that in this blessed country of free enquiry and belief, which has surrendered its creed and conscience to neither kings nor priests, the genuine doctrine of one only God is reviving, and I trust that there is not a *young man* now living in the United States who will not die a Unitarian. The population of my neighborhood is too slender, and is too much divided into other sects to maintain any one preacher well. I must therefore be contented to be a Unitarian by myself." This is not a sectarian appeal, but a plea for toleration, rational belief and a faith concerned with human rights. We can rejoice that he belonged to our household of faith only as we break with all that turns a liberal faith into a partisan affair.

need to guess about Jefferson on religion, for we have his own words for our guidance.

A Religious Revolutionist

When a man writes the text for his own tombstone it is safe to conclude he puts down what he considers of top importance. Jefferson prepared his epitaph, and it reads:

AUTHOR
OF THE DECLARATION OF
AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE
OF
THE STATUTE OF VIRGINIA
FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, AND
FATHER OF THE UNIVERSITY
OF VIRGINIA

From youth through old age Jefferson kept an unflagging interest in religion. His writings are filled with it as a major enthusiasm of a crowded life. In his own day he was attacked as an infidel, and in our own time where his religious views are not attacked they are often buried by a heavy blanket of silence. Yet to Jefferson we owe directly a debt of gratitude for the separation of church and state in America, and the accepted right of judging the whole matter of religion for ourselves without the fear of penalty. It is here that Jefferson carries forward the gains won by Servetus, Socinus, Biddle and Priestley.

When Jefferson sought to end the tax-supported church and the spiritual slavery it exerted he found himself in the thick of a battle destined to be one of the stormiest of his entire career. It lasted ten years. The Virginia colonists were Englishmen who brought to these shores the Anglican church supported by the taxes of all citizens. The colony was divided into parishes over which ministers presided who got a salary consisting of lands, tobacco and a house. By Jefferson's time only a minority of the people remained loyal to the established church, but all were still obliged to support its ministers through taxes. Petitions for a change in this situation became quite numerous. The members of the legislature were churchmen, though the majority of the citizens were not. Hence the slow pace of reform in the matter of religious freedom. The controversy lasted from 1776–1786. The steps in this struggle are not important for us now, but the reasoning of Jefferson is. (There are still nations in the world where disestablishment of church and state has not occurred: Spain, Italy, England, Norway, and many others.) Let us turn to his own words:—

"Reason and free inquiry are the only effectual agents against error. Give a loose to them, they will support the true religion by bringing every false one to their tribunal, to the test of their investigation. Had not the Roman government permitted free inquiry, Christianity could never have been introduced. Had not free inquiry been indulged at the eve of the Reformation, the corruptions of Christianity could not have been purged away. If it be restrained now, the present corruptions will be protected and new ones encouraged."

"Difference of opinion is advantageous in religion. The several sects perform the office of *censor morum* over each other. Is uniformity obtainable? Millions of innocent men, women and children since the introduction of Christianity have been burnt, tortured, fined, imprisoned; yet we have not advanced one inch towards uniformity. What has been the effect of coercion? To make half the world fools, and the other half hypocrites. Reason and persuasion are the only practicable instruments. To make way for these free inquiry must be indulged; and how can we wish others to indulge it while we refuse it ourselves?"

Because Jefferson himself recognized that this statute he wrote was one of the three great achievements of his life, and because today it has been adopted into our own Bill of Rights, and into the laws of other countries such as Mexico, Russia and Czechoslovakia, it is worth noting a portion of the actual text of the bill establishing religious freedom in Virginia in 1779:—

"Section II. We the General Assembly of Virginia do enact, That no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burthened in his body or goods, or shall otherwise suffer, on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities."

To a friend named William Small, Jefferson owed much for the first seeds of independence in religion. Second only to Small in this influence was George Wythe. These were liberal and educated men who planted the idea of religious integrity in the mind of Jefferson so effectively that it remained there for a lifetime. In a letter to his nephew, Peter Carr, a young man, Jefferson explains clearly his own views:—

> "*Your reason is now mature enough to examine this object* [*religion*]. *In the first place, divest yourself of all bias in favor of novelty and singularity of opinion. . . . On the other hand, shake off all fears and servile prejudices, under which weak minds servilely crouched. Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of God; because if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason, than that of blindfolded fear. You will naturally examine first, the religion of your own country.*"[4]

So firm and courageous is the advice to the young man that after 150 years it could be used in our church schools without change. The letter continues on the matter of the Trinity (about which this book has spoken often):—

> "*You will next read the New Testament. It is the history of a personage called Jesus.*

---

[4] A. E. Lipscomb and A. E. Bergh, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, as quoted by Marie Kimball in *Jefferson—The Road to Glory* (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1943), pp. 125-126.

Keep in your eye the opposite pretensions: 1, *of those who say he was begotten of God, born of a virgin, suspended and reversed the laws of nature at will, and ascended bodily into heaven; and* 2, *of those who say he was a man of illegitimate birth, of benevolent heart, enthusiastic mind, who set out without pretensions of divinity, ended in believing them, and was punished capitally for sedition, by being gibbeted according to the Roman law, which punished the first commission of that offence by whipping, and the second by exile, or death in furca. . . . These questions are examined in the books I have mentioned, under the head of Religion, and several others. They will assist you in your inquiries; but keep your reason firmly on the watch in reading them all. Do not be frightened from this inquiry by any fear of its consequences. If it ends in a belief that there is no God, you will find incitements to virtue in the comfort and pleasantness you feel in its exercise, and the love of others which it will procure you. If you find reason to believe there is a God, a consciousness that you are acting under his eye, and that he approves you, will be a vast additional incitement; if that there be a future state, the hope of a happy existence in that increases the appetite to deserve it; if that Jesus was also a God, you will be comforted by a belief of his aid and love. In fine, I repeat, you must lay aside all prejudices on both sides, and neither believe nor reject anything, be-*

> *cause any other persons, or descriptions of persons, have rejected or believed it. Your own reason is the only oracle given you by heaven, and you are answerable, not for the rightness, but uprightness of the decision . . .*
>
> *"My views are the result of a life of inquiry and reflection, and very different from that anti-Christian system imputed to me by those who know nothing of my opinions. To the corruption of Christianity I am, indeed, opposed; but not to the genuine precepts of Jesus himself. I am a Christian, in the only sense He wished anyone to be; sincerely attached to His doctrines, in preference to all others; ascribing to Himself every human excellence; and believing that He never claimed any other."*[5]

Little do we wonder as we read these sentences that narrow and bigoted men during the Presidential campaign of 1800 attempted to stir public opinion against Jefferson for his religious views.[6] As a recent biographer, Marie Kimball in *Jefferson—The Road to*

---

[5] Kimball, pp. 127-128.

[6] Jefferson showed absolute fearlessness in moral and political issues. He had calmly risked the British King's gallows in 1776, and he did not flinch now when loud voices in his own country called him "atheist," "Jacobin," and "subversive." The Virginian was a friend of the French Revolution, but to his conservative opponents, as the historian Professor S. E. Morison reminds us, "France had become just such an object of fear and loathing as, in 1920, the Soviet Union became to American conservatives . . . President Dwight of Yale predicted in his Fourth of July Sermon of 1798 that Jeffersonian Republicanism meant nothing less than 'our wives and daughters . . . soberly dishonored; speciously polluted . . .'" Within two years the smear campaign had failed, as such campaigns do, and Jefferson was President of the United States. See S. E. Morison and H. S. Commager, *The Growth of the American Republic* (3rd ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1942), I, 371.

Glory suggested: "He was a religious revolutionist."

Space forbids discussion at length of Jefferson's attitude toward organized religion and ministers. The record indicates that he gave contributions to Anglican, Baptist and other groups (one a Charlottesville meeting in a public building resembling a modern "community church"). We have already noted that he regretted the absence of a Unitarian church in his part of the country. Priestley's church in Philadelphia was the nearest, and he had attended its services while in Philadelphia. But Jefferson feared priestcraft and its works, and knew the strong temptations clergymen have to turn reactionary and serve a single class instead of the people as a whole. To Horatio Spafford he wrote: "In every country and in every age, the priest has been hostile to liberty. They have perverted the purest religion ever preached to man into mystery and jargon, unintelligible to all mankind." As we see priests in many countries at this hour serving fascist masters, and slowing the liberation of enslaved peoples in a score of lands, the words of Jefferson cut like a whip into our conscience.

Finally, under the specifically religious activities of Jefferson we turn to what we might call "the hobby of a President." In the White House, after the day's conferences with diplomats and congressmen were done, Jefferson retired to his study and unlocked his desk. Scissors, paste and a scrapbook were brought forth — and a copy of the New Testament. Then page by page he proceeded to prepare *The Philosophy of Jesus.* It was a clipping of what he considered the clearest and most sublime ethical teachings of Jesus. By January, 1816, he not only prepared this digest from his English Bible but added parallel columns in Greek, Latin and French. It was bound in red leather and carefully preserved. Of his own devout and earnest study of his private Bible we have one evidence — his comment on one occasion, reading: "I never go to bed without an hour, or a half-hour's previous reading of something moral, whereon to ruminate in the intervals of sleep."

Jefferson's Applied Religion

"I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man." With these words and a gigantic energy behind them Jefferson made his religion march into the daily tumult of affairs. He began with the first tenet of all profound religion: "We are the sons of God and it doth not yet appear what we shall be."[7] *The people can be trusted.* In Jefferson's words: "I am not among those who fear the people. Educate and inform the mass of the people. Enlighten the people generally and tyranny and oppression of the body and mind will vanish like evil spirits at the dawn of day."

Such convictions were not mere fervent abstractions to be read to friends over a glass of wine. They were battle cries and slogans to be used when men like David Hume in England and Alexander Hamilton challenged them and sought thereby to bolster up the Tory cause of kings and classes. When Hume denied

---

[7] I John, 3:2.

Jefferson's idea that "the people are the origin of all just power" the great Virginian replied, not without some vehemence, "And where else will this degenerate son of science, this traitor to his fellow-men, find the origin of *just* powers, if not in the majority of society? Will it be in the minority? Or in an individual of that minority?" Jefferson had no doubts about his fundamental faith in the people and from it his platforms rose.

Earlier in this book we have met with a doctor, a philanthropist, three ministers, a scientist; but this is our first statesman, one who knew the hot breath of politics and yet knew also how to keep his religious faith tied to the job in hand — the building of a decent world, the pursuit of happiness. Having settled in his own mind that a democracy could be built out of the thirteen colonies, he proceeded to labor for certain new experiments. We shall name a few of them.

1. *Widespread Suffrage.* "Every man, and every body of men on earth, possess the right of self-government. They receive it with their being from the hand of nature." This meant that the influence of government must be shared among all of the people. "My opinion has always been in favor of universal suffrage."

2. *Popular Education.* In the legislature of his own state of Virginia, in which he sat for several years, he introduced bills for popular education far in advance of his time. One of them contained provisions for free elementary public schools supported by taxes.

Its provisions included one that each term a boy should be selected "of best genius in the school, of those whose parents are too poor to give them further education" and that this boy should be sent at state expense to a school of higher learning. Our Army and Navy wartime program of college training is just catching up with this Jeffersonian ideal and will have to be defended in its basic philosophy when peace returns.

He was the father of the University of Virginia, and had hoped to see a great national university established. This got no further than a national library started with his own private books and later developed into the Library of Congress.

3. *Free Press.* The experience of Thomas Paine's pamphlet, *Common Sense*, going into hundreds of thousands of copies and doing more than any other single printed page to strip men's wills for battle, had taught Jefferson the necessity of newspapers and books written by and for the people themselves. He knew the ever-present peril of printing presses owned by reactionary men and used against the people in the name of "freedom of the press." "Yellow journalism" existed in his day, and he fought it as a major enemy of the people.

Jefferson discovered the dangers to the people of an irresponsible press during the tumult of his two administrations when his opponents, the Federalists, sought to discredit him through the newspapers they controlled. He wrote, "The newspapers of the country by their abandoned spirit of falsehood have more effectively destroyed the utility of the press than all the shackles devised by Bonaparte." The notorious defeatist tactics of a few large American newspapers during the present World War II provide an interesting parallel.

4. *Free Science.* Nowhere in his vast writings do we find the progressive character of Jefferson, and his desire to advance the well-being of the people themselves, more than in his comments on science. This is partly because he himself was a planter, an inventor, a practical-minded manager of a large estate. Tools for the worker needed constant improvement. Science could lighten the load of toil and serve *the pursuit of happiness.* "I am for encouraging the progress of science in all its branches. Science is more important in a republican than in any other government." To Robert Fulton in 1810 he wrote: "I am not afraid of new inventions or improvements, nor bigoted in the practice of our forefathers. It is that bigotry which keeps the Indian in a state of barbarism and still keeps Connecticut where their ancestors were when they landed on these shores. Where a new invention is supported by well-known principles, and promises to be useful, it ought to be tried. Your steamboats will be a source of permanent blessing to your country. I confess I have more hopes of the submarine boat. No law of nature opposes it."

In a day before industrial chemistry had produced plastics, synthetic yarns, and sulfa drugs, it startles one to find Jefferson writing to James Madison (1788): "Speaking one day to Monsieur de Buffon on the present ardor of chemical inquiry, he affected to consider chemistry but as cookery, and to place the toils of the laboratory on a footing with those of the kitchen. I think it, on the contrary, among the most useful of the sciences, and big with future discoveries for the utility and safety of the human race."

5. *Democratic Strategy and Foreign Policy.* Jefferson knew how to make his actions effective, because he knew how to put first things first. The Virginian yielded to no man in the integrity of his moral standards, but he did not insist on perfection as the price of unity. He was an enemy of slavery; but when Congress struck his indictment of the slave trade from his draft of the Declaration of Independence Jefferson did not abandon that assembly. Side by side with the slave owners, he fought for the independence of America, to make certain first of that decisive victory. It was Jefferson who helped to build the far-reaching Virginia-New York alliance between frontiersmen, mechanics, Southern planters, and the "Sons of St. Tammany," to insure effective unity for the building of many of the foundations of American democracy. He believed in sticking to the letter of the Constitution; but he went beyond it in order to secure the Louisiana territory for the United States. In a day when every important country in Europe was an aristocratic kingdom, Jefferson opposed permanent foreign alliances for the United States; but he wrote to President Monroe that this country should accept a British alliance in order to defend the young Latin-American Republics against the European monarchies. What he had to say about Great Britain then

might well be said today of all our great allies — Britain, Russia and China.

"By acceding to her proposition, we . . . bring her mighty weight into the scale of free government, and emancipate a continent at one stroke, which might otherwise linger long in doubt and difficulty. Great Britain is the nation which can do us the most harm of any one, or all on earth; and with her on our side we need not fear the whole world. With her then, we should most sedulously cherish a cordial friendship; and nothing would tend more to knit our affections than to be fighting . . . side by side, in the same cause. Not that I would purchase her amity at the price of taking part in her wars. But the war in which the present proposition might engage us . . . is not her war, but ours. Its object is . . . keeping out of our land all foreign powers. . . . It is to maintain our own principle, not to depart from it." (Letter to Monroe, Monticello, October 24, 1823.)

This American-British Alliance existed tacitly when President Monroe shortly afterwards pronounced his famous "Monroe Doctrine."

Jefferson was deeply attached to the American system of political democracy; but he stood for the right of every nation to choose freely its own form of government, no matter how different it might be from that prevailing in the United States. From Europe and Asia to our own hemisphere this insight of Jefferson is still fundamental for all realistic postwar planning: —

"We surely cannot deny to any nation the

> *right whereon our own government is founded — that every one may govern itself according to its own will, and that it may transact its business through whatever organ it thinks proper, whether king, convention, assembly, committee, president or anything else it may choose.*"

To us, as members of the United Nations, Jefferson stands for the tradition of unity. Keeping faith with his own aims and values, he remained ready to join hands with anyone who would help him to take a step towards realizing them. The Moscow, Cairo and Teheran Conferences in late 1943 underscore this wisdom of Jefferson.

The Significance of Jefferson to Unitarianism

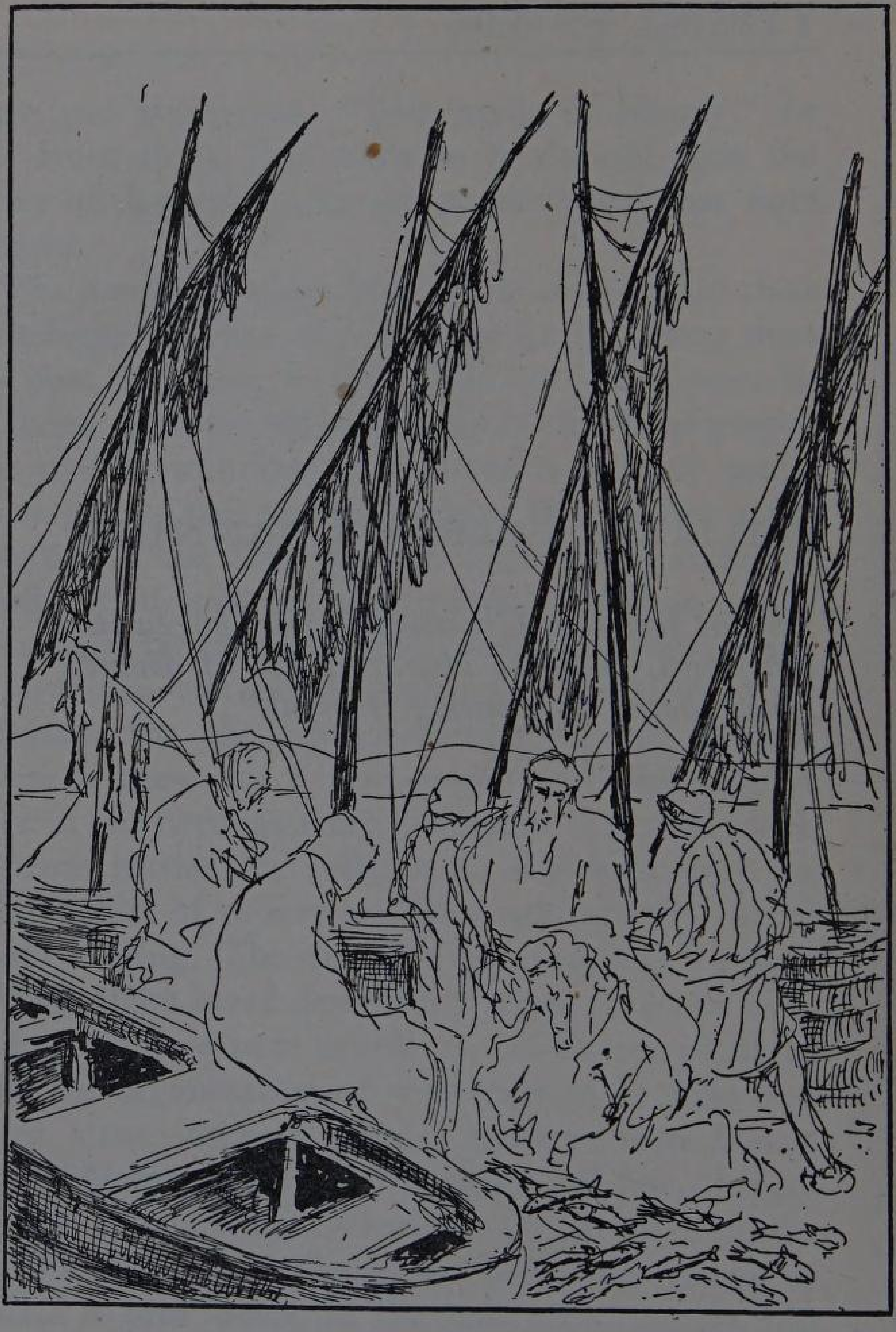
Jefferson, as a profoundly religious man, left as his legacy one of the most perfect examples on record of practical religion, of ethics at work in the service of man, of brotherhood perpetually fertile and advancing to new forms of human welfare and good will. But Jefferson never walked with his head in the clouds. He wrote the Declaration of Independence, and also tried to find a legal formula for emancipating his slaves without leaving them at the mercy of exploiting villains. He made plans for a national system of free education, and at the same time imported new seeds from France to help the farmers on his estate experiment with new vegetables and fruits. He not only spoke of liberty but understood and defended the desperate men who followed Daniel Shays in Western Massachusetts, men driven mad by the threat of foreclosure and starvation. "The perils of liberty," he wrote from Paris, "are more to be desired than the security of slavery." Jefferson never missed that note of liberty.

The preceding pages have made abundantly clear that Jefferson had far more interest in the future than in the past. Nothing would offend him more, were he alive today, than to find men using his words as gospel, or his specific solutions to eighteenth-century problems as guides for present action. He rather set a standard for the free man to follow — a standard formed out of spiritual convictions. Belief in progress, faith in the common man, confidence that well-educated men can build a workable society, joyous enthusiasm for the resourcefulness of the natural universe — these are a few possessions time cannot tarnish in our heritage from Jefferson. After he lived, it became harder for religion to slip back into its ancient habits of otherworldliness and apathy in the face of suffering. The stubborn efforts of the Virginia gentleman who loved democracy strengthen our own hands as we face new problems: elaborate plans to thwart the organization of workingmen in mine and factory, campaigns to divide America into hostile camps of Negro and white, Christian and Jew. Jefferson added to our religious heritage by his clear thinking in his study, and also by his unfailing energy to translate it into deeds, in the halls of Congress and across the opening plains of the West. With Carl Sandburg the spirit of Jefferson proclaims: *The People, Yes.*

7

WILLIAM ELLERY CHANNING

"Do not feel as if Christianity has spoken its last word. It is the characteristic of divine truth that it is infinitely fruitful."



Channing Brought Religion Back Whence It Had Come

7

WILLIAM ELLERY CHANNING

THE scene is the office of the President of Harvard College in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1798. The persons present: the President, three members of the faculty and a secretary. The occasion of the gathering is a student petition. One of the professors is speaking: "Mr. President, this petition from the student body requests the nomination of William Channing for the position of commencement orator for the senior class. Now I realize that Mr. Channing's academic standing is excellent, that his family is one of the finest in Rhode Island, his father having been, as you gentlemen know, the United States District Attorney of the State and his mother a daughter of William Ellery, a signer of the Declaration. . . . Still, gentlemen, I am troubled."

"At what, sir?" the President asks.

"At his recent activities. He is overzealous to discuss political affairs about which students of his age obviously know nothing. The public mind is highly inflamed. We are in danger of war with France. The Boston papers tell us that the mechanics in New York and Philadelphia sympathize openly with the people of France at a time when we are finding it needful to fire on French ships off our coasts.

Mr. Channing called a group of students together just last week, as he tells me, for 'the purpose of expressing their opinions on the existing crisis in public affairs.' Shall such a young radical speak at Commencement and utter *we know not what* as his address? . . ."

Finally the President arose and removed his spectacles.

"Gentlemen, we have discussed this matter at length. I have decided to grant the students' request, but with the express understanding that young Mr. Channing will at no point refer to current affairs. The meeting is dismissed. Good day, gentlemen." Only after several conversations with the President did William accept the limitations set upon his speech.

Ten days later Commencement Day dawned bright and gay. By the hour for the ceremonies to begin a large audience was seated in the Meeting House, and in the front pews sat the faculty and local clergy in solemn dignity. The prayers and opening services were concluded with formality. One hour from the time the first hymn had been sung a slender, gentle-mannered young man arose and proceeded to the pulpit to deliver the commencement oration. The senior class looked at each other with breathless expectation. "What will William do?" His subject was "The Present Age," the theme was the French Revolution. He spoke with strength and precision. His oration moved to its climax. His final point needed only a telling illustration to drive its swiftly mounting logic home to every hearer. He paused. . . . The Meeting House was hushed as professorial eye met professorial eye from pew to pew. The five seconds pause seemed like an hour. He turned to the faculty. The gentle voice began again with great force.

"But that I am forbid, I could a tale unfold that would harrow up your souls." The students burst into wild applause. He left the platform, but it was some time before the cheering ceased. The day was won. In all good faith the cause of moral independence had won the hearers as no hour-long oration might have done. William Ellery Channing had begun a life of strong and fearless action. He was to be in years to come the embodiment of the unsleeping conscience of a new and freedom-loving nation.[1]

The Life of William Ellery Channing

William Ellery Channing was born April 7, 1780, at Newport, Rhode Island. The Channings had come to America from Dorsetshire, England, in 1711. William was born in the midst of the American Revolution, and grew up in the mental climate of liberty. He was accustomed early to daily grappling with the issues it presents to men who breathe its air. His grandfather, William Ellery, had been one of the "Sons of Liberty," a group which led the people in discovering the need for action and decisiveness in gaining freedom for the colonies. For this and other services he later signed the parchment penned by Jefferson and called in those great days "The Declaration." Following Channing's college days at Harvard, during which time he had formed his resolution to be a Christian minister, he spent a year and a half in Richmond, Virginia, as a tutor to the family of David Randolph. The conflict between Yankee and Southern patterns of thought compelled him to search his mind far more than most of us do at the age of nineteen. Long hours of study and experiments with overfrugal habits of diet led to a breakdown in his health from which he never recovered during the remaining forty-three years of his life. A frail body, a quiet manner and a gentleness of temperament were to be for nearly half a century accompanied by an invincible spirit and unmatched moral courage. His frail health protected him from some of the exertions his natural interests would have otherwise selected. It was therefore not a complete liability.

---

[1] One classmate wrote: "Many years have passed since then, but the impression left on my mind of the brilliancy, vividness and eloquence of that oration is still fresh."

These years in Virginia account in part for his later break with the orthodoxy of New England — both theological and political. On the remote plantation far from his friends and earlier influences, he discovered Jefferson's writings and those of Jean Jacques Rousseau whose books from France had served the cause of liberty so well the generation before Channing's own. He studied the ideas and events of the French Revolution, an experience to which he often referred when he returned to Boston. It was in defense of French liberal political theories that he uttered near the end of his life his immortal phrase to a bewildered Harvard student visiting in his study, "I am always young for liberty." It was from French writers — especially the "Physiocrats"— rather than from earlier Unitarians that he derived his lifelong views about the goodness of human nature. When he later proclaimed to a Calvinist New England "the adoration of goodness — this is religion," we can be quite sure his Virginia reading served him well.

In 1803 Channing rejected an invitation to be the minister of the Brattle Street Church in Cambridge because he felt it would be too arduous a responsibility. So he accepted instead the far less flourishing Federal Street Church in Boston. This church became his great dominion. Here he ruled in democratic splendor with an adoring (though frequently disturbed) congregation for the remainder of his life. In his study during the next forty years great events transpired. A new denomination, the Unitarian, resulted in spite of his firmest hopes that a break would not be required. New societies for peace, for temperance, for popular education, for prison reform began in that book-lined room. Here he worked with Horace Mann, Dorothea Dix, Wendell Phillips and many others.

William Ellery Channing chose the Federal Street Church because it was a modest undertaking, befitting one with limited reserves of energy. Yet in six years the trustees found it necessary to tear down the structure and build a far larger church. Channing's preaching, and even more his engaging and gracious personality, compelled the action. His fame in the pulpit and out of it ran before him and made him friends across the continent. Before we continue further with this man after whom countless churches, young people's societies, halls and even streets are named today — to say nothing of several generations of children — it might be of profit to retrace our steps and ask "What had been going on in America as far as the Unitarian cause was concerned? Were these new Americans familiar with Socinus, David, Biddle, Priestley and the rest of those to whom we have been introduced in earlier pages?"

Sparks but No Fire

This book will make no effort to tell the story of religion in New England from the time of the Plymouth settlement to 1800. It must be sufficient for our purposes to note that though he never made a personal appearance, John Calvin made a spiritual encampment on the niggardly soil of the colonies which was never effectively challenged until the nineteenth century. There were sparks of religious liberalism, but no fire blazed steadily.

In 1747 Jonathan Mayhew, minister of the West Church in Boston, began as a heretic (in the eyes of his contemporaries), and found his fellow ministers unwilling to assist in his ordination or to admit him to their ministerial association. He was known to read the books of the English Arians and to correspond with them. With a sharp tongue, Mayhew scorned the Calvinist doctrines of his time. In 1753 he preached a sermon against the Trinity, and two years later published a booklet which urged the unity of God. This date, 1753, is historic since it marks the first recorded sermon against the Trinity preached on this side of the Atlantic. His people, to their everlasting credit, supported their minister, who remained in the same pulpit fifty years.[2] Not until 1804 when Hosea Ballou, a Universalist minister, published *Treatise on the Atonement*, did a second minister repudiate the doctrine of the Trinity in print. If any of the readers of this chapter think this is dusty quarreling over an indifferent matter, it should be remembered that as these pages are being written young men and women in these United States fail to secure teaching positions in schoolhouses in countless states, or fail to draw patients or clients to their newly established doctors' or lawyers' offices in some southern and western towns, because they are suspected of harboring "Unitarian views." The issue was not then and is not now simply a matter of heavenly arithmetic, but of the vastly more important issue of *thinking for oneself in religion*. We can well imagine a Louisiana schoolboard chairman asking his committee, "If Miss Jones denies the Trinity now, what may she not think by next year about other matters? She may support the C.I.O. or equal education for the colored folk."

---

[2] The congregational form of church organization in the New England parishes greatly aided the Unitarians, for no bishop's frown existed to forbid the democratic process from operating on matters of religious belief. Except in Connecticut, each congregational parish was an independent social unit. No Parliament, as in England, made laws against belief in the Trinity. No archbishop terrorized his village clergy. While the Unitarian issue was long delayed in New England, when it came it moved swiftly into parish after parish, and was settled by some good farmer on a back seat of the meeting calling for "the question" to be voted on.

In 1758 the Reverend John Rogers was dismissed from his pulpit in Leominster for questioning the divinity of Christ. In 1753 a friend and colleague of Jonathan Mayhew, named Lemuel Briant, in North Braintree, boldly preached against the Calvinist view of Jesus, which resulted in a church council being called to charge him with "the error of Socinianism." His church people investigated for themselves and decided their minister was right. He remained to serve his people many years.

Another spark which failed to start a fire[3] was King's Chapel in Boston, the first Episcopal church established in New England (1686). After the American Revolution, this famous church lacked a minister, and in 1783 called a layman, James Freeman, to be its leader, to conduct worship and preach occasionally. The Church of England's Athanasian creed (which it will be remembered was the official doctrine selected by Constantine in the fourth century instead of the views of Arius) was not popular in America, so Freeman omitted it. Other problems bothered the young leader of King's Chapel, especially the Trinity. He offered to resign, but his wise pewholders recommended that he preach several sermons on the subject. Like Lemuel Briant's congregation thirty years before, these thoughtful parishioners voted to support the Unitarian ideas. A visiting English Unitarian, William Hazlitt, had met Freeman at this period and showed him Theophilus Lindsey's Unitarian prayer book from

---

[3] While King's Chapel is still Unitarian in 1944, the expected Unitarian blaze in New England churches did not begin until several years later.

London. In a short time Freeman and the people of King's Chapel had made religious history by introducing a new prayer book devoid of any reference to the Trinity (1785). No bishop could be found to ordain so daring an innovator, and in 1787 the Warden of his own congregation ordained him. Freeman corresponded during the years with Lindsey and Priestley in England, but no new churches — Episcopal or Congregational — followed the example of King's Chapel.

The remaining sparks are few. Dr. Belknap of Federal Street Church, Boston — later to be Dr. Channing's congregation — omitted all trinitarian hymns from its 1795 hymnbook. The Reverend John Sherman of Mansfield, Connecticut, in 1805 adopted the views of Priestley and Lindsey, for which the other churches of the state (which had authority over all Congregational pulpits) required him to leave even though his own congregation wished him to remain. He went to Oldenbarnevelt, New York, where a church had been established in 1803 by a group of American liberals led by two Socinians from Holland, exiled for their views. Meanwhile, Joseph Priestley had arrived in Pennsylvania — seeking refuge from the intolerance of English orthodoxy. In 1794 he established a Unitarian church in Northumberland, *the first to bear the Unitarian name in this country.* Two years later, Priestley established a second church, this time in Philadelphia.

In Massachusetts after the American Revolution liberal religious ideas began to germinate in the minds of Congregational church members and ministers. At the close of the Revolution John Adams listed some seven men in the vicinity of Boston as Arians. In 1785 Aaron Bancroft — later to be the first president of the American Unitarian Association — became minister in Worcester to a group in the First Church who shared his Arian views and withdrew from the majority. In 1792 in Taunton and in 1800 in Plymouth the Calvinist-minded members withdrew from the church rolls and founded new churches rather than be further infected by the Arian views then gaining currency. But in all this period, from the West Church's loyalty to Mayhew in 1753 until the division in the Plymouth church in 1800, no organized Unitarian movement resulted. The Arians, the Socinians, the Unitarians (and they were called all three names, always with contempt) found no leader and issued no challenge.

Mr. Channing Goes to Baltimore

Today when we speak of a "best-seller" in American bookstores from Bangor to San Francisco we think of books like *The Outline of History*, *The Story of Mankind*, *Mrs. Miniver*, or *One World*. In 1819 William Ellery Channing preached a sermon in a pulpit in Baltimore at the ordination of a young man named Jared Sparks. It was published and became a real best-seller for a long time. It was a religious declaration of independence against the tyranny of John Calvin's ghost, which was still a very active ghost indeed. Without question this Baltimore address remains the most important sermon ever preached in this country by a Unitarian, judged in terms of later results. From this time on men were forced to take a stand on the issue which Channing raised. In this respect Channing resembled Martin Luther at Wittenberg; he compelled men to make a clear decision on a fundamental problem. Unitarianism in America is dated by that sermon, preached by a relatively young man with a shock of dark brown hair, large friendly eyes and a voice so unlike that of the usual orator that it is hard to see him as the founder of a new fellowship of churches — the Unitarians.

The Baltimore sermon became the recognized statement of the new anti-Calvinist theology. Further sermons, notably his sermon at the dedication of the Second Unitarian Church in New York in 1826, elaborated Channing's fundamental religious views, but the Baltimore sermon with its clear proclamation of God's beneficence set the pace. It was a logical, forthright broadside *against* Calvinism and *for* the Unitarian viewpoint.

As he stood in the Baltimore pulpit for what his listeners soon recognized as a stirring call to the colors of liberal Christianity, Channing pronounced the Calvinist doctrine of "election" an insult to God and man. (Election implied that a few souls were chosen by God to enjoy salvation, but that the vast majority were doomed.) A later Unitarian teacher, Dean Fenn of Harvard Divinity School, has simply stated that the Calvinist had the difficult job of proving that while the tight universe of divine fatalism left man little freedom, it left him "just enough to be damned on." Against such a dark and immoral view of God Channing proposed to wage battle with swift, telling blows. He found in democratic America an enthusiastic hearing.

Engraved in stone under the graceful bronze statue of William Ellery Channing in Boston's Public Garden the visitor today can read "HE BREATHED INTO THEOLOGY A HUMANE SPIRIT." No better words could have been chosen to summarize his contribution to religious thinking than those.

In contrast to the depressing deity of the orthodox churchmen of 1819 Channing asked men to hold a new conception. "The only God whom our thoughts can rest on, and our hearts cling to, is the God whose image dwells in our souls." In contrast to the sectarian character of most Protestantism of his age, split proudly into warring sects and creeds and united only in opposition to the other world faiths (Judaism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Mohammedanism, etc.), Channing stated: *"I regard all minds as one family."* This was heresy of the first magnitude.

The Baltimore sermon, and the energetic preaching and writing which followed it, began to break many chains long clamped upon the ankles of the American people. As we look at him today four ideas stand out as central in Channing's ministry: 1. Freedom is absolutely necessary in religious belief. Coercion has no justification. 2. Righteousness is the fruit of freedom. 3. God can best be described as good. (*Beneficent* was Channing's term.) 4. Man's excellence far surpasses his evil character.

Channing did not propose a new creed to replace an old one. Rather he reminded men of the excellence of the quest for truth, the importance of recognizing new truth when it is found, and the peril of surrendering to the blackest of all sins — compulsory subscription to a creed or idea one does not believe to be true. His message could be understood by the most unlettered citizen or the most honored scholar with equal clarity: *the right of human reason, the primary dignity of human nature, the simplicity of the Christian teaching.*

It is not important that we record the day-by-day struggles that followed in the wake of the Baltimore sermon. The battle was in earnest and feeling ran high. It had been so in Geneva with Servetus, in Cracow with Socinus, in London with Biddle; and so it was with Channing in Boston. There were no faggots and no public bonfires by our venerable friend the common hangman; but instead the warfare raged in Dedham courthouse and the parish meetinghouses throughout New England where the orthodox sought by injunction and the ballot to stop the heresy of Channing and his friends.

The times favored change, reform, and a more liberal philosophy. The new ideals of freedom born in Europe caught hold of men's minds in Massachusetts. Channing, and soon after him Emerson and Parker, naturalized these "alien" ideas and added to them something new and yet familiar to American ears — an unquenchable confidence in the religious integrity of the common people. It was a time when there were several experiments in communal living like Brook Farm, Fruitlands, and Hopedale (to mention but three). The industrial revolution was getting into full swing. The unsleeping conscience of Channing soon saw the relationship between man's divine worth and the crippling exploitation of child labor in the cotton mills along the Merrimac River, and the necessity of building a church prepared to act on the side of human values. The ferment of democracy was taking hold of the Yankee mind and religion was not by-passed in the process. The theology of John Calvin with its antipathy to the spiritual and material hopes of the common man was destined to frontal attack in such a new atmosphere. It came by way of the Unitarian controversy. When Dr. Channing preached on "the human soul" (as he often did) his listeners soon discovered it was not a mystical abstraction, it was anchored to a body which must not be desecrated by exploitation, slavery or sin. The modern world had come to stay in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and soon in all America.

Probably no finer statement of man's love of freedom and unwillingness to surrender to what we today call Fascism can be found than in the following words of Channing from *Introductory Remarks* (1841):—

> *"It is because I have learned the essential equality of men before the common Father, that I cannot endure to see one man establishing his arbitrary will over another by fraud, or force, or wealth, or rank, or super-*

> *stitious claims. It is because the human being has moral powers, because he carries a law in his own breast and was made to govern himself, that I cannot endure to see him taken out of his own hands and fashioned into a tool by another's avarice or pride. It is because I see in him a great nature, the divine image and vast capacities, that I demand for him means of self-development, spheres for free action, that I call society not to fetter, but to aid his growth."*

The record is clear: Channing did not seek a new religious denomination; but as we have seen in our survey of Poland, Transylvania and England, so we find in the American chapter a reform of the existing churches was impossible. One by one many churches of the Congregational order, using their inherent democratic privilege of settling their own affairs by a decision of the local church, voted to become Unitarian. In 1820 the ministers who shared the Unitarian outlook formed what was called "The Berry Street Conference" for the purpose of discussing the issues of liberal religion. In 1821 the *Christian Register* was established for the promoting of Unitarian views. In May 1825 the American Unitarian Association was formed to provide a fellowship of the individual churches and to serve as a missionary medium for promoting the cause. In all of this activity Channing was the recognized and inspiring leader.

The minister of Federal Street was not a general who liked to give marching orders. He did not want a new sect: "I desire to escape the narrow walls of a particular church and to live under the open sky looking far and wide and seeing with my own eyes and hearing with my own ears." Only when convinced that to stay in the orthodox churches would cost him and his fellow Unitarians the surrender of their newly-won convictions did he consent to the setting up of the machinery of another organization, even one very loosely organized. Eventually, had we time for the story, we should find the Unitarians buying a printing press like Socinus in Rakow, issuing tracts, training ministers, sending out missionaries, building churches and uniting the energies of many thousands of Americans under the inclusive name of Unitarianism.

Boston's First Citizen

While Channing became the acknowledged leader of the Unitarian cause, this was not his first occupation. He became in many ways the classic pattern of the liberal minister for several generations. His profound faith in the creative power of human nature and its need for exercise in the free atmosphere of a new nation led Channing to forty years of service to a vast variety of groups making up the life of Boston.

He pioneered in what we today call "adult education," the broadening of the mental and spiritual horizons of the laboring classes and the great middle class, though his own church consisted of many of the wealthy, the well-educated and successful men and women of his time. To those who protested that there were millions of ignorant and hopeless people beyond redemption, with neither endowment of mind or body to advance themselves, the voice of Channing replied instantly: —

> *"It is a libel on social order to suppose it requires for its support the reduction of the multitude of human beings to ignorance and servility; and it is a libel on the Creator to suppose that he requires as the foundation of communities the systematic depression of the majority of his intelligent offspring. . . . All hopes of stability which do not rest upon the progress of the many must perish."*[4]

When such words alarmed some of the more conservative members of his parish who felt this might lead to another revolution, his reply was equally prompt: "I have no fear of revolutions. We have conservative principles enough."

As he grew older he grew more bold, and the idle notion that radicalism is a disease of youth was once again refuted by the quiet ministry of the Federal Street preacher.

> *"There are seasons in human affairs of inward and outward revolution when new depths seem to be broken up in the soul, when new wants are unfolded in multitudes and a new and undefined good is thirsted for. These are times when the principles of experience need to be modified, when hope and trust and*

---

[4] Channing, "On the Elevation of the Laboring Classes."

> *instinct claim a share with prudence in the guidance of affairs, when in truth to dare is the highest wisdom.*"

With such a self-proclaimed creed for action he stepped out into a troubled world and opened doors for people who had begun to hope.

The same courage that had marked his commencement oration came into play again and again. His tender social conscience grew out of his humanitarian faith, which he found in the New Testament, Rousseau and Jefferson. Without a trace of fear he stepped into the thick of human problems which a timid and prudent minister would have dodged with some suitable explanation to himself and his friends.

When in 1834 one of his closest friends, the Reverend Samuel J. May, came to him about his failure to take an active part in the anti-slavery cause and to chide him for his criticisms of those who did take part as "harsh and severe men," we see the unblemished greatness of Channing's character. The Reverend Mr. May in his loyalty to the slavery cause had asked Dr. Channing: "Is it becoming in you to complain because we speak in such an inferior way against what you acknowledge to be an awful injustice, when you, perhaps more than any other man, might have raised a voice of remonstrance that would have been heard through the length and breadth of the land? Why, sir, have you not spoken before?" After a long pause the Federal Street minister replied: "Brother May, I acknowledge the justice of your reproof: I have been silent too long." From that day until his death he served the cause of Negro freedom with devotion, though he rather favored other methods of emancipation than immediate abolition.

The following year (1835) he delivered his great address on slavery; and in 1837 he signed an open letter to Henry Clay, the advocate of compromise on the slavery question. Although he never enjoyed controversy, agitation and reform politics, Channing nevertheless fearlessly spoke at Faneuil Hall that same year (the meeting being called at his suggestion) to protest the murder in Alton, Illinois, of Elijah Lovejoy, the intrepid printer of abolitionist papers. It was one of the first great public meetings in Boston to mark the century of emancipation, and was one of the most stirring events of Channing's life. His last speech was to commemorate West Indian emancipation, and was delivered in Lenox, Massachusetts, two months before his death, which occurred October 2, 1842.

No biography of Channing, however brief, can be a fair account which leaves unmentioned his genius for the personal and private ministry of friendship. He was to thousands in his generation a source of endless power and encouragement. He stood so straight against the sky himself, rejecting every compromise, that men could trust his counsel and believe his speech. His life had logic like his doctrine, and gave men hope.

In concluding this story of Channing's life, comment should be made on the Abner Kneeland affair. Kneeland was imprisoned under an old statute which permitted a man to be jailed for atheism. The city was in an uproar over the prisoner's stubborn refusal to profess belief in deity. None could be found to come to his defense except the distingished minister of Federal Street Church, whose faith in God all America knew and honored. That a man in the nineteenth century should be thrown into the city dungeon for religious nonconformity Dr. Channing could not bear, and he went into the dirtiest of cells and sat with Abner Kneeland to prepare the petition for his release. The man who delivered the Baltimore sermon was never blind to the daily obligation to practice what he preached. It took men by surprise.

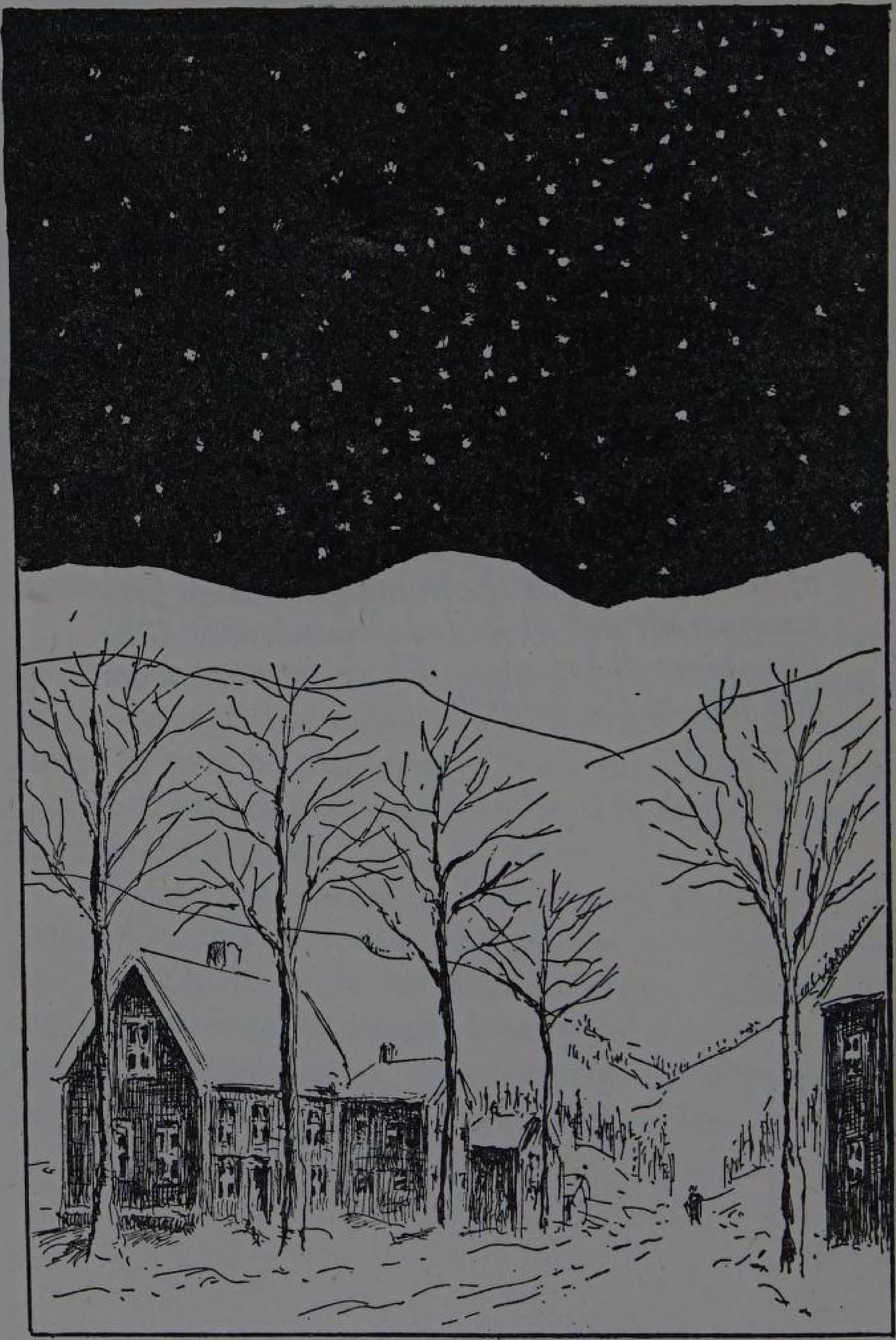
His fellow minister and friend, Theodore Parker, speaking of Channing years later, used words appropriate enough for cutting into marble for the centuries of men to memorize: "Few men have been so true to things as they ought to be. He forgot himself in finding the truth."

Today the visitor to the chapel in Arlington Street Church in Boston can see the graceful pulpit used by Channing in his Federal Street Church. It serves as a shrine of simple beauty to remind us in a later generation of a man utterly consecrated to reason, humanity and the power of the spirit.

8

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

"Why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? The sun shines today also. There is more wool and flax in the fields."



Emerson's New England

8

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

NOT a martyr "brent with flaming faggots,"[1] nor a sick scholar dragged across the cobblestones to see his own books burned in the market square, but a quiet young writer of essays standing before a graduating class of young Americans at Harvard Divinity School marks the next great step in the march of a free faith.

On a warm summer evening, July 15, 1838, Ralph Waldo Emerson, a young Boston-born lecturer who had resigned in 1832 as minister of a Unitarian church in his native city, made a speech destined to shatter not only the calm and highly respectable Unitarian notions of his day, but miraculously to explode with fresh detonations every few years ever since. In the stark language of modern war, his address before the young theological graduates was a blockbuster. Every Unitarian in America knew he had been hit. After that July evening in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a great deal of rebuilding had to be undertaken as soon as the rubble had been hauled away. It was the second most important Unitarian address ever made in this country — the first being, of course, Channing's sermon at the ordination of

---

[1] "Brent" was the early English term for "burned."

Jared Sparks in Baltimore in 1819, which, as we observed earlier, led to the establishment of the Unitarian denomination on this side of the Atlantic. The now famous Divinity School address became the charter of liberal religion for a century to follow.

It proved in a very decisive manner the enormous power of ideas in the life of men. The story of Emerson involves no comets, no tidal wave, no earthquake — just the still small voice of a man inspired of God to speak from the depth of an agitated conscience.

The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson

Ralph Waldo Emerson was born in Boston in 1803. His boyhood was a fight against poverty and ill health. He came from eight generations of Puritan ministers struggling for most of those two centuries against hostile circumstances. New England had proved a cheerless and frugal environment for the Emersons. His lifelong optimism was an act of will little short of a miracle the more one studies it. His family, like many of the period, was made sad by tuberculosis. A brilliant brother died of the disease, as did also his first wife. He and his second wife escaped it by the narrowest of margins. One of his brothers was mentally defective; another burned out his life early in the West Indies. Against this background of unhappiness stood Emerson, a man like Whitman and Lincoln, strong of mind, confident of faith, resolved to build a mighty world for the free spirit to enjoy — a world of giant undertakings and unbounded hopes. His modest appearance, his unpretentious voice, his lack of brawn and muscle, faded from consciousness as men and women sat on hard board benches in towns and cities newly built in Indiana and Ohio, Kentucky and Illinois, to hear the lecturer from Concord proclaim: "Democracy, Freedom, has its root in the sacred truth that every man hath in him the divine Reason." Cow-handlers, farmers, men of the covered wagon and powderhorn, left the hall more confident something new under the sun was being built by their hands in Fort Wayne and Alton.

Emerson attended the Boston Latin School and Harvard College, from which he was graduated in 1821, and began to teach with his brother in a private school, an experience for which he had no enthusiasm and which he soon ended. He attended lectures in the Harvard Divinity School in 1823. Six years later he accepted the Unitarian pulpit of the Second Church in Boston, once occupied by one of the sternest of Calvinists, Cotton Mather. After three and a half years he resigned because of scruples over the Lord's Supper, a service on the interpretation of which he differed from his congregation. He never accepted another church call, though he preached occasionally and did serve the East Lexington congregation from 1835 to 1838. He also preached a few times for the Music Hall congregation left leaderless by the death in middle life of Theodore Parker.

It is significant that two of the men to make the greatest contribution to the Unitarian movement in the nineteenth century were looked upon at the time by most Unitarians as exiles — one by choice, the other by the decision of "fellow" Unitarians.

After a year of European travel in 1833, during which time he met Carlyle and Coleridge, Emerson moved out to Concord, Massachusetts, where, except for his lecture tours throughout the United States and one more European visit, he lived until his death in 1882. He was not a man of action, he was a man of ideas — but ideas, it must be noted, which drove millions of men on every continent during the next century to revolutionary action. Emerson, like many of his friends along the Concord River, was a planter of seeds. They scattered theirs across the fields; he with wider prodigality sowed his around the planet.

Emerson is known to recent generations of Americans from their high school courses in English as a writer of essays and poetry, as the most ingenious inventor of aphorisms in our literary history. Hundreds of his essays, such as "Self-Reliance" and "Friendship," testify to his talents at packing (almost it seems with compressed air drills) a chapter of thought into a single Anglo-Saxon sentence. It is not with Emerson, the pre-columnist to the American people, however, that we are dealing in this book, but with Emerson, prophet of a new period in the Unitarian movement. He fabricated a whole new style of modern furniture for the minds of ministers and people in our churches. While Emerson belongs to all America and to the whole world, we are here honoring his special contribution to our own household of faith.

The Teaching of Emerson—Transcendentalism

A small group of liberal Boston reformers, impatient with the sluggish mental climate of their period, gathered together for study, the reading of papers, and the discovery of some new principles in religion and life as a whole. Dr. James Freeman Clarke, a minister later to make a large contribution to the understanding of comparative religions, reported that they called their group the "club of the like-minded, because no two of them agreed with each other at the start." The public called them "the Transcendentalists." The group began to publish a magazine called the *Dial*. Emerson was the leader of the club, and it was his advice, *to revere the oracle of individual intuition.*

In his lifelong diary, known as the *Journals*, we find Emerson making an entry, at the age of thirty-six, which states better than a schoolroom definition the character of Transcendentalist thinking:

> *"What shall be the substance of my shrift? Adam in the garden, I am to new name all the beasts in the field and all the gods in the sky. I am to invite men drenched in Time to recover themselves and come out of time, and taste their native immortal air. I am to fire with what skill I can the artillery of sympathy and emotion. I am to indicate constantly, though all unworthy, the Ideal and Holy Life, the life within life, the Forgotten Good, the Unknown Cause in which we sprawl and sin."*[2]

---

[2] *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. E. W. Emerson and W. E. Forbes (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1909-1914), V, 288.

Against what must we read this statement? Against the background of the America of 1839. As a new nation we had fought two wars and were now pursuing a new struggle, the conquest of a continent — a continent still largely unexplored, where mills and factories, railroads and steamships, houses and schools were needed in a hurry by impatient men. The very dimensions of the task compelled the minds of men to grow at a faster pace; but the direction of this growth disturbed the clear and steady brain of Emerson. Mere size, speed itself, acres of timber, mountains of coal, steam, electricity — these material things had upset the spiritual vision of his generation. He asked for a fresh inventory of our assets and liabilities. Emerson was a friend, not a foe, of the new democratic order being built. But he saw that "things are in the saddle and ride mankind." He proposed to trumpet from the housetops of this new nation the paramount fact of *man the oracle* and *man the end* of all endeavors; it was man that really came first, not wealth, or power, or the making of a titan state.

So Transcendentalism was the immediate name given this new emphasis upon the primary fact of the spirit of man and its powers. For us it is more important to observe what the ideas behind it really were, for they survived the awkward label and its often very awkward followers by many years.

Emerson, like all of the men with whom we have become acquainted earlier in this story of liberal religion, was not overimpressed with tradition. "I am to new name all the gods in the sky." He became the combination of a preacher-editor-judge of the new America arising along the river valleys and on the prairies. He began by garnering with expert eye the wisdom of the past to serve him as a rule in the business of evaluating his own generation, too busy to gather such wisdom for itself. "No man could be better occupied than in making his own bible by harkening to all those sentences which now here, now there, now in nursery rhymes, now in Hebrew, now in English bards, thrill him like the sound of a trumpet." No man knew the English Bible better than Emerson, but he proposed to write his own. It was this resolution that acquainted him with more of the great wisdom of past centuries, including other religions, than any other American. It was this first-hand acquaintance with the spiritual resources of the past that saved his advice — to be one's own oracle — from producing in his own case a shallow, superficial gospel.

Emerson was stating for the American people a confidence in the common man and his strength which Jefferson and Channing had learned from Jean Jacques Rousseau and others in France a generation earlier.

Man is sovereign. "How is the King greater than I, if he is not more just?" asked Emerson. Again, he proclaims in his *Journals*, "The root and seed of democracy is the doctrine, Judge for yourself. Reverence thyself. The true divinity dwells in the soul of man." Not statecraft, not schools, churches, banks — these to Emerson were even dangerous tools stealing authority from man. We must remember that he saw about him frequent illustrations of ruthless greed and corruptions, scandals that can be paralleled in our time by promoters of numbers rackets, defaulting stock exchange presidents, defective war materials manufacturers, operators of black markets in meat and oil. Emerson felt that the principle upon which the expanding America must be built is operative good will. Only through the practice of this principle can a state with any pretense to brotherhood be forged. The average middle-class American (the shopkeeper, the white-collar worker, the doctor and lawyer) must discover his unity with the masses of those who toil. Emerson saw the importance of a sense of self-respect in the farmer, the millworker and the carpenter.

Emerson saw how an emphasis upon gaining money and property (and an undue veneration of it) built a wall between classes.

> *"The highest end of government is the culture of men. The advantages of riches remain with him who produces them, not with the heir. The state must consider the poor man, and all voices must speak for him. Every child that is born must have a just chance for his bread. No one should take more than his share."*

Emerson, like Channing, was one of the few men of our Unitarian faith in those days of the 1830's who plowed a deep furrow in the soil of democracy; with him no surface harrow would do the job.

> *"See this wide society of laboring men and women. We allow ourselves to be served by*

> *them, we live apart from them, and we meet them without a salute in the streets. We do not greet their talents, nor rejoice in their good fortune, nor foster their hopes, nor in the assembly of the people vote for what is dear to them."*

Emerson, one feels, would have better understood the proceedings of a C.I.O. or A. F. of L. convention today than many a modern Unitarian, because he would have known what really was on their minds.

It is worthy of note that about the same time in England a similar insight into the importance of the working class entered the minds of Unitarians like Richard Wright and Joseph Barker. Especially among the woolen manufacturing villages of Lancashire did leaders like these two ministers of our faith reach the toiling people with a religion of equality, human dignity and hope for a world made decent and happier. Churches and Sunday schools were established (not missions, but people's churches) right beside "the dark satanic mills," to use William Blake's immortal description of them. In both Wright's England and Emerson's America liberal religion began to discover some of the very practical barriers to true religion — poverty, slavery, ignorance, disease and war. Toward all of these Emerson helped us turn our eyes.

A One-man Reformation

The Divinity School Address and later essays on religious subjects produced a one-man Reformation in New England. The thunderbolt he hurled into that small gathering in a brick building on a side street of Cambridge had its swift effect. It compelled every Unitarian (as well as many men of other Christian denominations) to define himself. In a wholesome and refreshing manner it divided our church of 1838. Theodore Parker soon after the address wrote "There are now two parties among the Unitarians. One is for progress; the other says 'Our strength is to stand still.' Channing is the real head of the first party; the other has no head." Dr. Channing (so soon to be taken by death) had no criticism of the famous Emerson address of July 15 to the divinity students. He told friends he saw no essential difference between it and what he himself had said at the dedication of the same school not long before. This was the comment of the "bishop" of American Unitarianism. He too welcomed the reformation resulting from Emerson's "nailing of the theses to the door"— not of Wittenberg but of Harvard — complaining that the very air was growing thick in Massachusetts, that a spiritual sleep had fallen upon it. "I cannot draw a long breath in Boston," he admitted at this period.

The Religious Ideas of Emerson

This brief chapter cannot survey more than the most basic of teachings in the message of Ralph Waldo Emerson, but it is important that we hear his accents, even briefly, with a careful ear. His words on religion caused our churches, both ministers and people, to take an abrupt turn in the road and cut a new trail across unfamiliar terrain.

The center of gravity in religion is the one fact of God made manifest to the soul of man.

> *"The laws of the soul execute themselves. He who does a good deed is instantly ennobled. . . . If a man is at heart just, then insofar he is God. If a man deceive, he deceives himself. Thus is man made the Providence to himself, dispensing good to his goodness and evil to his sin."*

> *"If the doctrine of inspiration is lost, or the oracle made secondhand, the church falls, and the state, art, letters, and life. . . . It is the office of a true teacher to show us that God is, not was; that he speaketh, not spake. . . . I am divine, through me God acts; through me, speaks. . . . Dare to love God without mediator or veil. I also am a man, yourself a new-born bard of the Holy Ghost; cast conformity behind you, and acquaint men first-hand with deity."*

In words such as these Emerson announced the first clear and uncompromising definition of rational religion in America. For half a century the voice continued to speak and be listened to without benefit of radio networks, mass circulation or Hollywood film — yet many thousands of people heard and believed. A new era in religion had dawned.

To the young graduates about to assume pulpits in New England meetinghouses he said: "Not any profane man, not any sensual, not any liar, not any slave can teach, but only he can give who has. The need was never greater of a new revelation than now."

Those who sat before him knew they were hearing a religious declaration of independence.

Emerson saw conventional and threadbare statements about religion — about Christianity and Jesus and God — impeding the advance of genuine creative spiritual life. In this address he knew he was using explosive words. He so intended it. Miss Elizabeth Peabody in a book of reminiscences about Channing and Emerson tells of being present when Emerson corrected the proof-sheets of this now celebrated lecture. He read to her and to Mrs. Emerson this sentence: " 'The defect of historical Christianity was its dwelling with noxious exaggeration about the *person* of Jesus, by which the friend of man is made the injurer of man.' . . . How does that strike your Hebrew souls?" he asked the two listeners. Miss Peabody replied: "I like it, but put in a large F to designate Jesus as the Friend of souls." Emerson paused, and then replied: "No: directly I put a large F in they will all go to sleep."

Emerson realized the continuous peril true religion faces of being frozen into creed, ritual, ceremonial and mere Sunday-morning habits. He wanted to repeat over and over again its freshness, its growth, its ever new reorganization of life on higher levels, in richer patterns of life for mankind.

> *"The religion of one age is the literary entertainment of the next. We use in our idlest poetry and discourse the words of Jove, Neptune, Mercury, as mere colors and can hardly believe that they had to the lively*

> *Greek the anxious meaning which in our towns is given and received in churches when religious names are used; and we read with surprise the horror of Athens, when, one morning the statues of Mercury[3] were found broken in the temples, and the consternation was in the city, as if, in Boston, all the orthodox churches were burned in one night."*[4]

He always wanted to get to the real business of religion and go beyond the ugly stage of bitter controversy and dusty argument. We are reminded of this cleansing emphasis, which marked also Francis David and John Biddle, when we read Emerson's words before the Free Religious Association many years after the Divinity School proclamation:—

> *"I think we have disputed long enough. I think we might now relinquish our theologic controversies to communities more idle and ignorant than we. I am glad that a more realistic church is coming to be the tendency of society, and that we are likely one day to forget our obstinate polemics in the ambition to excel each other in good works."*

Emerson, like many of the men of liberty discussed earlier, disliked the sectarian features of Christianity and sought to find the common factors of spiritual insight, of ethical teaching, in all religion.

> *"Zealots eagerly fasten their eyes on the differences between their creed and yours; but*

---

[3] This reference is to the famous incident in the Syracusan expedition of the destruction of the Hermes by Alcibiades of Athens.

[4] Emerson, essay on "Character" in *Lectures and Biographical Sketches.*

the charm of the study is the finding of the agreements, the identities, in the religions of all men."[5]

These words echo with special significance in our own time when United Nations as well as other peoples across the earth must for their own preservation learn to share the *immortal* agreements of their faiths or perish. The zealot in Christianity can be as truly an enemy of mankind as his counterpart among the Mohammedans or Hindus.

The sharp pen, the exact phrase, the simile as penetrating as a surgeon's scalpel won Emerson the reputation of an idol-breaker, a critic. While he was not one to spare a judgment because it might cause momentary pain, he was essentially a constructive thinker. He gave Americans and many others the bricks, timber and mortar for building a house of freedom.

As Emerson looked at the churches of his day he grew rebellious, as many people do today when viewing some churches on Main Street or by village greens — dark, musty, somber structures, open one day a week, peopled with timid, fearful folk cherishing their ancient revelation and staring with a jealous eye at any meddling stranger. Against such churchmen he cast his thunder. He was often brutal in his comments on the church, because he loved the church *which might be built* and which he felt in later years of his life was possibly in a final blueprint stage, in the stage where engineers and subcontractors begin to order their scaffolding and shipments of supplies. Here is what Emerson said about this church to be: —

---

[5] Address before the second meeting of the Free Religious Association.

> *"There will be a new church founded on moral science, at first cold and naked, a babe in a manger again, the algebra and mathematics of the ethical law, the church of men to come, without shawms and psaltery or sackbut; but it will have heaven and earth for its beams and rafters, science for symbol and illustration."*[6]

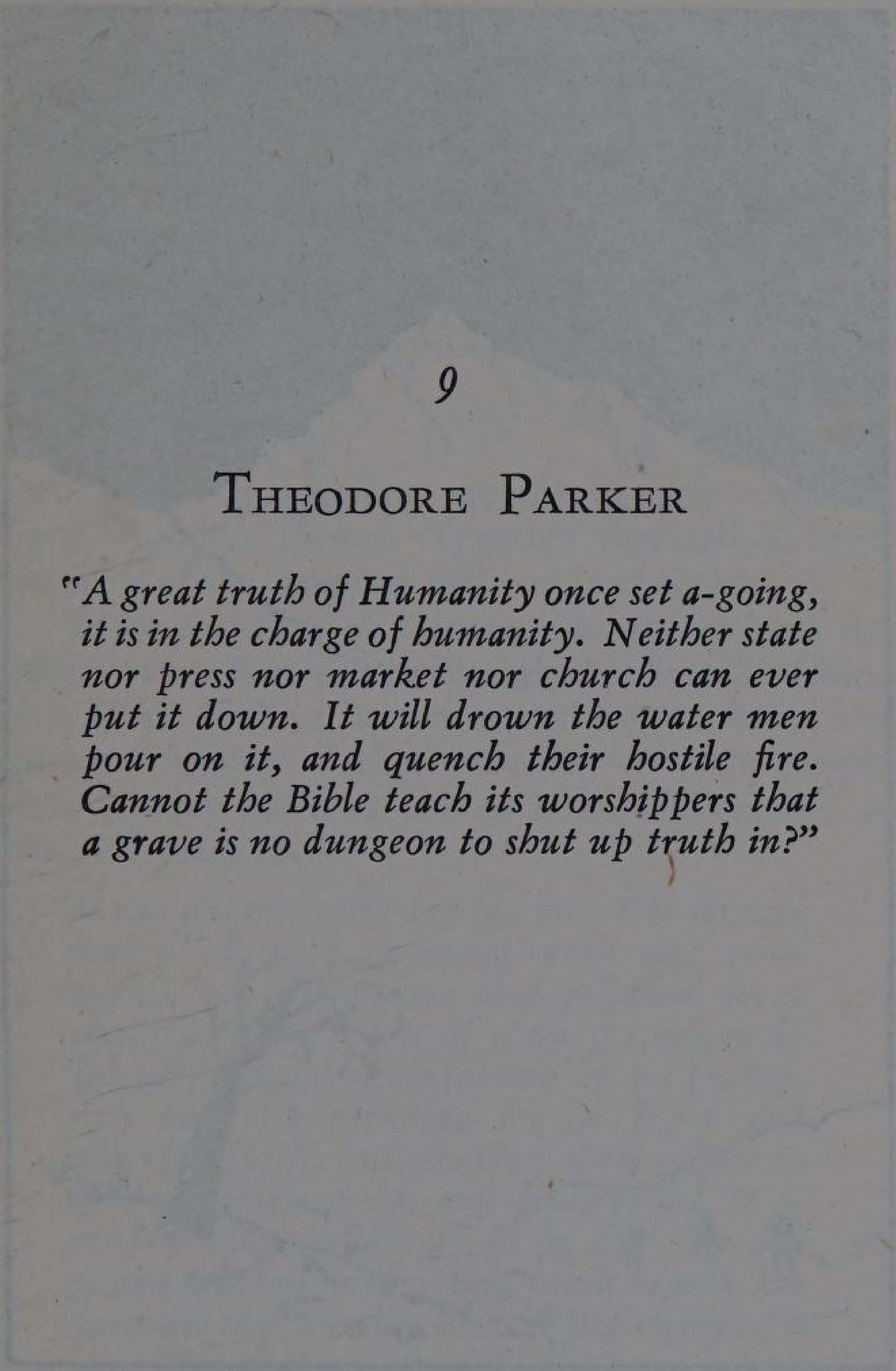
This corrects what some have called the "exaggerated individualism" of Emerson. As the years passed he discovered the social character of man, his interdependence upon his fellows, his need for collective responsibility to act for his higher interests, even when his temperament is that of the individualist who loves his books and study. When the Fugitive Slave Law was passed, compelling Northerners to return escaped slaves to their Southern owners (and possibly to their death), Emerson wrote with burning temper: "This filthy enactment was made in the nineteenth century, by people who could read and write. I will not obey it, by God." He threw himself into the struggle for the freedom of the slaves — the major issue of his generation.

The tall, slender, long-nosed intellectual aristocrat proved himself to be a warmhearted, courageous brother and leader of the people's cause. In his essay on "The President's Proclamation" in the November

---

[6] Essay on "Worship" in *Conduct of Life.*

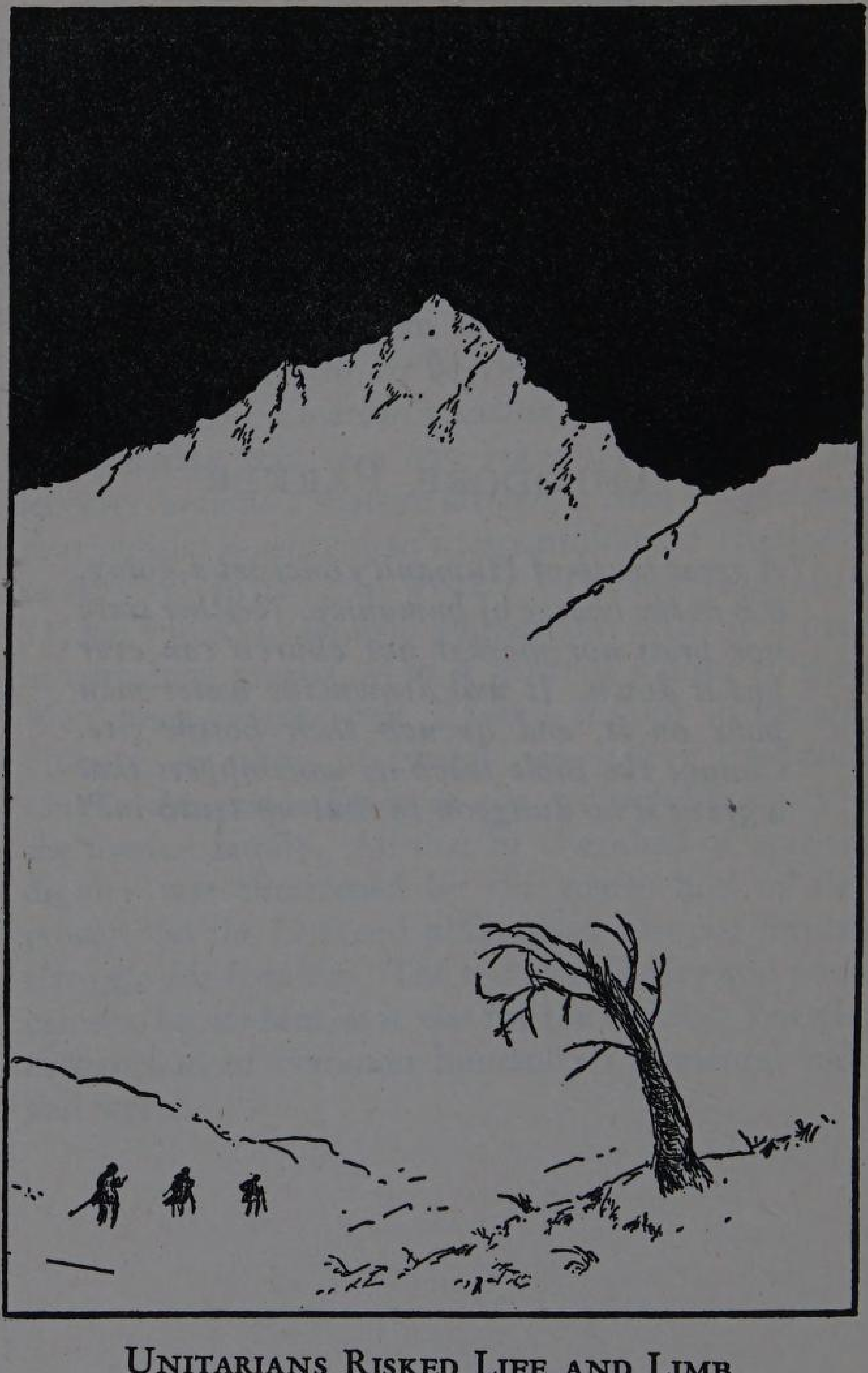
1862 *Atlantic Monthly*, Emerson wrote: "In times like these, when the nation is imperilled, what man can, without shame, receive good news from day to day without giving good news of himself? What right has any one to read in the journals tidings of victories, if he has not bought them by his own valor, treasure, personal sacrifice, or by service as good in his own department?" Emerson's earlier separation of idea and act gave way to a new realism. The writer and lecturer became a mature citizen, a man who learned that politics is every man's responsibility if freedom is to survive. In 1852 he writes: "The last year, 1850-51, has forced us all into politics and made it a paramount duty to seek what it is often a duty to shun. We do not breathe well. There is infamy in the air." History, in terms of brutal pro-slavery legislation, taught the gentle Emerson the indissoluble unity of the human family. All that he cherished of spiritual dignity was threatened by the coarse heel of slave power. So the Concord philosopher stepped into the struggle for freedom. The test of sincerity and power came to be for him, as it was for the scientist Priestley, recognition of common humanity's elemental unity and worth.



9

THEODORE PARKER

"A great truth of Humanity once set a-going, it is in the charge of humanity. Neither state nor press nor market nor church can ever put it down. It will drown the water men pour on it, and quench their hostile fire. Cannot the Bible teach its worshippers that a grave is no dungeon to shut up truth in?"



UNITARIANS RISKED LIFE AND LIMB

9

THEODORE PARKER

Two brief scenes belong together in any narrative about Theodore Parker. Together they tell in brief summary of the direction and power of his life.

From the diary of a young woman we have the picture of her first visit to the ugly and barnlike Melodeon Music Hall in Boston in the 1840's, where the famous Theodore Parker preached to 3000 people every Sunday morning for an hour, and sometimes two. The diary reads: —

> *"It was a memorable day for me. The sermon was filled with encouragement and sympathy, and the prayer that followed went straight to the hearts of those for whom he prayed, not only comforting by its tenderness and strengthening by its brave and cheerful spirit, but showing them where to go for greater help, and how to ask it as simply and confidingly as he did. To one young woman, just setting forth to seek her fortune, that Sunday was the beginning of a new life; that sermon like the scroll given Christian, that prayer the God-speed of one who was to her, as to so many, a valiant Great-heart leading pilgrims through Vanity Fair to the Celestial City."*

The young woman was Louisa May Alcott, whose novel *Little Women* is still one of America's best-sellers; the movie version — with Katharine Hepburn in a major rôle — filled the theatres of several continents not long ago.

The second scene would be from a manuscript written by Parker himself. It was written as he remembered the days of the Fugitive Slave Law when, like Emerson, he was moved with compassion for the fleeing black refugees from slavery. The manuscript reads: —

> *"I have had to arm myself. I have written my sermons with a pistol in my desk,— loaded, a cap on the nipple, and ready for action. This I have done in Boston in the midst of the 19th century; been obliged to do it to defend the innocent members of my church, women as well as men! You know I do not like fighting . . . but what could I do? I was born in the little town where the first bloodshed of the Revolution began. My grandfather drew the first sword in the Revolution. With these memories in me, when a parishioner, a futigive from slavery, a woman, pursued by kidnappers, came to my house, what could I do less than take her in and defend her to the last?"*

Both scenes reveal to us the man who carried into the times of our own grandfathers the torch set aflame by Michael Servetus and Faustus Socinus, the most daring and dedicated of all Unitarian reformers on this side of the Atlantic Ocean.

The Life of Theodore Parker

Theodore Parker was born on August 24, 1810, in Lexington, Massachusetts. He was the son of a farmer, and a grandson of the captain of the Minute Men who faced British fire on the Common of their village in 1775. Here, of plain Yankee stock, was born what one man has well called "the best working plan of an American yet produced." As a boy, he received but eleven weeks of schooling a year, a schooling so barren that he stretched it out by endless hours of reading at home when work with plow and pitchfork was done. At ten years of age the astonishing mind of Parker began to reveal itself. He knew 1000 lines of poetry by memory. He had read Plutarch's *Lives* and Homer's epics. And he knew nature well — the many kinds of trees, the plants, animals, the seasons.

In his teens he was a schoolteacher. He taught for six hours, and studied for ten after the chores were done. Because of poverty and duties on the farm he could not attend Harvard College classes, but he took all the regular courses and passed the examinations. He accepted a teaching position in Boston soon after his college studies were completed, and later returned to Cambridge to enter the Divinity School. The records tell us that after two months at the Divinity School he had read sixty volumes in English, Latin, Greek and Hebrew. His phenomenal mastery of languages never left him, and aided him greatly in his later study of German theology and philosophy, which he helped to introduce into America.

He preached briefly to the Cape Cod fishermen at Barnstable, and in 1837 was ordained in the West Roxbury church near Boston. Here he studied long hours, performed his many duties as a minister, preached and widened his familiarity with foreign languages. One year later he was in the little company that heard Ralph Waldo Emerson deliver the Divinity School Address. Of it he wrote: "It was the most inspiring strain I ever listened to, so beautiful, so just, so true, and terribly sublime! My soul roused, and this week I shall write the long-meditated sermons on the state of the church and the duties of these times." He never ceased to write them until the day of his death in Florence, Italy, in 1860, when at fifty years of age his exhausted body surrendered the indomitable spirit. By that time all America knew him, and thousands loved him as a personal friend though they knew him only in the lecture-hall or from the printed page.

It may be hard for readers in the 1940's to realize that one century ago a single sermon in this country could transform an obscure country preacher overnight into a public figure discussed, hated, loved and quoted in every country store throughout New England, and in streets and offices of cities everywhere — New York, Baltimore, Cleveland and Chicago. One sermon so lifted Theodore Parker into the white light of national importance. It was delivered at the ordination of the Reverend Charles C. Shackford in South Boston, and was entitled "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity." It came to be known as "the South Boston Sermon."

This lecture, together with Channing's famous 1819 sermon at the ordination of Jared Sparks, and Emerson's Divinity School Address, constitute the three declarations of liberal religion today recognized as uniting American Unitarians together as a fellowship. Many present-day Unitarians would reject parts of all of these three statements and would add later statements; but they would all recognize that in these three sermons of Channing, Parker and Emerson a core of belief about the nature of religion was expressed, and that they made possible a unity we had not possessed before. All three sermons created tremendous controversy. Counter-sermons were delivered, epithets hurled about like hand grenades, and measures suggested for social banishment of the three perpetrators; but today the addresses remain, after all the debate and argument, the foundation-stones of our present structure — the Unitarian fellowship of men and churches.

"The South Boston Sermon"

In May, 1841, the third rocket was fired into the sky of drowsy Boston Christianity. The sermon stated in clear and uncompromising language that supernatural religion was through and no longer had sufficient beams to support its structure. There had been an intellectual earthquake produced by science and philosophy, which shattered the foundations of revealed Christianity and left it in need of new supports — supports already resident within itself. Miracles did not prove Christianity, said Parker. These are *transient* elements in Christianity. The *permanent* element is found in the teaching of Jesus, the truth of which can be proven by practice and experience rather than by authorities and miracles. The forms of Christianity change; the substance of the spiritual life between men, and between men and God, remains.

"If it could be proved that the gospels were a fabrication and that Jesus of Nazareth never lived, Christianity would still stand firm and fear no evil. In an age of corruption, Jesus stood and looked up to God. There was nothing between him and the Father at all." Moral and religious truths, this sermon insisted, should not rest for their support on the personal authority of their revealer, any more than scientific truths rest upon the word of the discoverer. Go out and try them. Don't simply believe Newton; just drop a brick from a chimney top to the ground beneath. So also, the truths of religion are self-evident if tested by experience.

Charity would suggest that we omit reporting on the reception of these ideas, now accepted in our churches and considered axioms of our faith. Parker declared these homely first principles of liberalism at a time when the tide of Unitarianism was ebbing low. One biographer of Parker describes the contemporaries of the West Roxbury preacher in these words: "They were as complacent a set of Christians as ever took ship for the kingdom." Another writer on Parker in 1903 is equally honest in criticism of many Unitarian clergy of that period when he writes: "If their sayings and doings in the Emerson and Parker controversies give their measure, the clergy seem to have been a petrified and asphyxiated set of men, as destitute of red blood as the pre-Raphaelite saints." They refused to exchange pulpits with this new heretic; they refused his articles in their magazines; they wrote him abusive letters; they left the room when he entered it.

Even more bitter were the attacks from the orthodox, the Calvinists whose God of the Old Testament he rejected, as did Channing.[1] Prayer meetings were held by his enemies that he might see his errors. "We know that we cannot argue him down, but, O Lord, put a hook in his jaws, so that he may not be able to speak." Strong efforts were made to expel him from the Unitarian ministry. His name appeared in the Yearbook of Unitarian churches and ministers but twice, in 1846 and 1848. Those ministers who showed good will by exchanging pulpits upon occasions found they were themselves under attack, notably the Reverend John Sargent and Dr. James Freeman Clarke. The conservative Unitarians began a period of appeasement of the orthodox, beginning with efforts to exile Parker from their midst, and coming to a climax at a Unitarian convention at Worcester in 1853, when it was objected that a proposed monument to Michael Servetus honoring the 300th anniversary of his martyrdom would "offend the orthodox." The appeasement failed utterly. The orthodox grew no more friendly. Not until the Civil War did the Unitarians brace themselves for a program of positive declarations and activity as a group of forthright believers. Meanwhile, in 1845 Parker resigned his West Roxbury pulpit and became minister of the Twenty-eighth Congregational Society, preaching in the Melodeon Music Hall to a large congregation determined that he should be heard in Boston, whatever his fellow clergymen thought of him. With newspapers, magazines and pulpits against him, he preached each week to 3000 people, by far the largest congregation in the city.

---

[1] "The defect of the Unitarians was a profound one," wrote Parker in his letter to members of the 28th Congregational Society. "Ceasing to fear the 'great and dreadful God' of the Old Testament, they had not quite learned to love the all-beautiful and altogether lovely [God] of the universe."

America was beginning to hammer out religious convictions of its own, based on clear thinking, proven experience, its own logic and intuition. It could understand a man like Parker in his plain speech, without affected manners, as he stood in his vast Melodeon Hall or on a "lyceum" platform proclaiming "The doubt of man is greatly nobler than the creed of the fool." Parker found a great new audience across the continent, because he broke with many formalities people had associated with religion. He was a devout freethinker. It was his purpose, he said, "to make the will of God prevail in a world where the devil openly kept his ledgers." While he broke with the worship of the Bible as a book magically secure from criticism and mechanically applied to life, he showed his fellow citizens its strength and power as a record of human striving after knowledge, spiritual power and the meaning of history.

Since belief that God was at work within the universe was fundamental with Parker, we can better understand his faith in the adequacy of man in this natural world — man the builder, the creator, the shaper of his fate. He tried to establish this fact in the science of his day (a pre-Darwinian science, for *The Origin of Species* was not published until the year before Parker died, 1859). Still the idea of evolution, of growth and change from protozoa to primates and finally to man the maker of families and societies, swept through the mind of Parker like a great western cyclone, sweeping debris and ancient landmarks before it.

> *"Progressive development does not end with us; we have seen only the beginning; the future triumphs of the race must be vastly greater than all accomplished yet."*

So we see how Parker could state so easily: "As for my theology, it has grown out of me as naturally as my arm has grown out of my body."

Parker, Prophet of Righteousness

If the church leaders of America, Unitarian and orthodox alike, found Parker a disturbing voice to their slumber, Parker found the average church of the 1840's far from his ideal of what a Christian church should be.

> *"The churches need a revival. No institution is more than her churches. No thirty thousand men and women are so bigoted and narrow as the thirty thousand ministers. The churches are astern of all other craft on the intellectual sea. . . . The church should be*

the means of reforming the world, of forming it after the pattern of Christian ideas . . . it should therefore bring up the ideas of the times, the sentiments of the times and the actions of the times, and judge them by the universal standard."

With this pronouncement about the church, Parker let go with his mighty salvos heard from Maine to the westernmost frontier. As one biographer has stated: "His genius lay in agitation." His piercing eye and flaming conscience set about appraising the time in which he lived. He inaugurated a courageous policy of necessary destruction; all dead wood, all rubble, all needless obstructions to progress were cast into the fire. Unlike many of his fellow-ministers in other pulpits, Parker never spoke in mere abstractions or generalities. He named names with alarming frequency. When he marched into the pulpit, statesmen, financiers, preachers and editors trembled. And the people listened. *Society* was made specific. His ideal of Christian righteousness exempted none from exposure. He attacked men who paid low wages and high dividends and built churches with their profits. He attacked newspapermen who revelled in scandal and juicy gossip. He struck sharply at church pewholders who gathered high rents for squalid tenements, who approved of taxes for war but not for public schools. Above all, he hammered with words and deeds at the cotton merchants and manufacturers of the North who defended human slavery for the trade it brought into their tills. In short, he insisted that men look at the sordid warfare misnamed society, a crime of their own making, *which can and must be changed.*

> *"See the unnatural disparity in man's condition — bloated opulence and starving penury in the same street. See the pauperism, want, licentiousness, intemperance and crime in the midst of us; see the havoc made of woman; see the poor deserted by their elder brother, while it is their sweat which enriches your ground, builds your railroads, and piles up your costly houses."*

"Society must assume responsibility for its own shortcomings." This was his message to his generation. And he then proceeded to set them an example. In the place of Daniel Webster's cynical and selfish view that "the great object of government is the protection of property at home and respect and renown abroad," he proposed "government becomes more and more of all, by all and for all," words which Abraham Lincoln remembered and used with slight changes of phrasing at Gettysburg. "A nation making laws for the nation is a noble sight." This was Parker's deep conviction and we today owe to him a vast debt. He started the American people thinking in far broader terms than before about the business of a democratic state in an industrial age and under a Christian idealism.

Emerson watched Parker teach the American people some of the personal skills of Christian citizenship. In later years Emerson paid one of the greatest tributes to the ostracized prophet of the Melodeon Music Hall: "He never kept back the truth for fear to make an enemy. It was his merit, like Luther, Knox, Latimer and John the Baptist, to speak tart truth when that was peremptory and when there were few to say it. He insisted that the essence of Christianity is its practical morals: it is there for use, or it is nothing; and if you combine it with sharp trading or private intemperance or successful fraud or immoral politics or unjust wars or cheating the Indians, it is an hypocrisy and the truth is not in you . . . and no love of religious music or praise of John Wesley or of Jeremy Taylor can save you from the Satan you are."

Parker spoke to the masses of the people with force and dignity, using clear speech and illustrations they could grasp. To the people of Boston, merchants, bankers and workers alike, he cried out: "When I remember that all value is the result of work, I cannot help thinking that labor is often wickedly underpaid and capital sometimes grossly overfed. I shall believe that capital is at the mercy of labor when the two extremes of society change places." Such a man understood the principle of what we today call "putting a ceiling on salaries."

His political principles were learned from Rousseau, Priestley and Jefferson. He took the "rights of man" with deadly earnestness. As he grew older and even surer of his democratic philosophy, he grew more radical, though no less religious. He preached Sundays and lectured weekdays after spending nights in primitive conditions of travel which only a man of utter dedication could survive. He labored for temperance, for women's rights, for prison reform, for workingmen's housing, for social legislation to control many forms of economic exploitation, and — surpassing all other issues in his lifetime — for the abolition of slavery.

The friends of Abolition had no greater leader than Theodore Parker. He knew the issues, he sensed the need for strategy, and he possessed the stamina to keep at work when the "summer soldiers" grew weary. During the struggle, William Lloyd Garrison fought slavery with his paper, the *Liberator;* Charles Sumner led the cause in the United States Senate, even to the extent of being beaten on the Senate floor; John Brown led a guerilla group at Harper's Ferry which sought to liberate the Virginia slaves. Lincoln in the famous debates with Douglas and later in the White House used every talent he had for statesmanship to prevent the extension of slavery and ultimately to give freedom to the Negro people. It was Theodore Parker in the pulpit who led the church people into the struggle. Not all followed him. As one justly bitter biographer of Parker commented: "The ministers who had felt the bishop's fingers chattered about Onesimus." (The story of Onesimus in the Bible was used by pro-slavery clergymen to sanction their cause.)

With others, Parker aided escaped slaves, and his voice was one of the most eloquent to protest the Fugitive Slave Law. In the case of Anthony Burns, citizens did not succeed in releasing the captured slave from prison, but Parker's magnificent appeal to the revolutionary spirit of Massachusetts aroused such public indignation that Commissioner Loring and other officials responsible for the return of Burns to his Southern owners were swept from office at the next elections. So infuriated were the plain people of the Commonwealth at the imprisonment of Burns that thousands came to the city, filled the streets, sought to break into the prison by force and rescue him, and were repelled only by the combined efforts of police, militia and the federal Army and Navy forces — all to take one poor Negro back into bondage. The words of Parker himself, speaking later of "The Boston Kidnapping," as he called the case of Anthony Burns, are worth our noting: —

> *"When the Fugitive Slave Law passed, the six New England states lay fast asleep: Massachusetts slept soundly, her head pillowed on her unsold bales of cotton and woollen goods, dreaming of 'orders from the South'. Justice came to waken her and she started in her sleep, and being frightened, swore a prayer or two, then slept again."*

But Parker did not simply pile up rhetoric against his enemies. On slavery as on other subjects he introduced into American preaching (and other types of public speaking) methods of persuasion and conviction of truth not previously known. With his logic and ethical insight he poured facts, statistics, evidence, knowledge of political events, reports, testimony — and let them carry their weight. He taught thousands of ministers in town and country the importance of naming names only when they are supported by evidence of evildoing, of underwriting every moral judgment with strong evidence the simplest mind could recognize — lessons the pulpit had not yet learned, even if it had wanted to learn them. Honesty, searching analysis, deep ethical beliefs gave to Parker's thundering sermons the power of an army marching with banners. Though he died in 1860, he had won his medals in a war about to begin.

At one period in the slavery struggle Parker had every reason to believe he would spend a term in prison for his role in "the underground railroad" which aided slaves fleeing to Canada. The inexhaustible energy, the continuous mental alertness and the sense of obligation to carry on his religious duties remain preserved for us today in a memorandum in his diary of the time. It consists of instructions to himself for his activities while in prison. It reads: —

> *"Write one sermon a week and have it read at the Music Hall. Also write a prayer. Prepare a volume of sermons from old manuscripts, write memoirs of my life. Begin volume I of 'Historical Development of Religion'. Pursue Russian studies."*

Parker's short, concentrated life, probably as energetically lived as that of any Unitarian leader on record, remains today a case study in true spiritual power intelligently applied to the next step needed for advancing the will of God on earth. He reminds one of Cromwell before him, and Lenin after him —

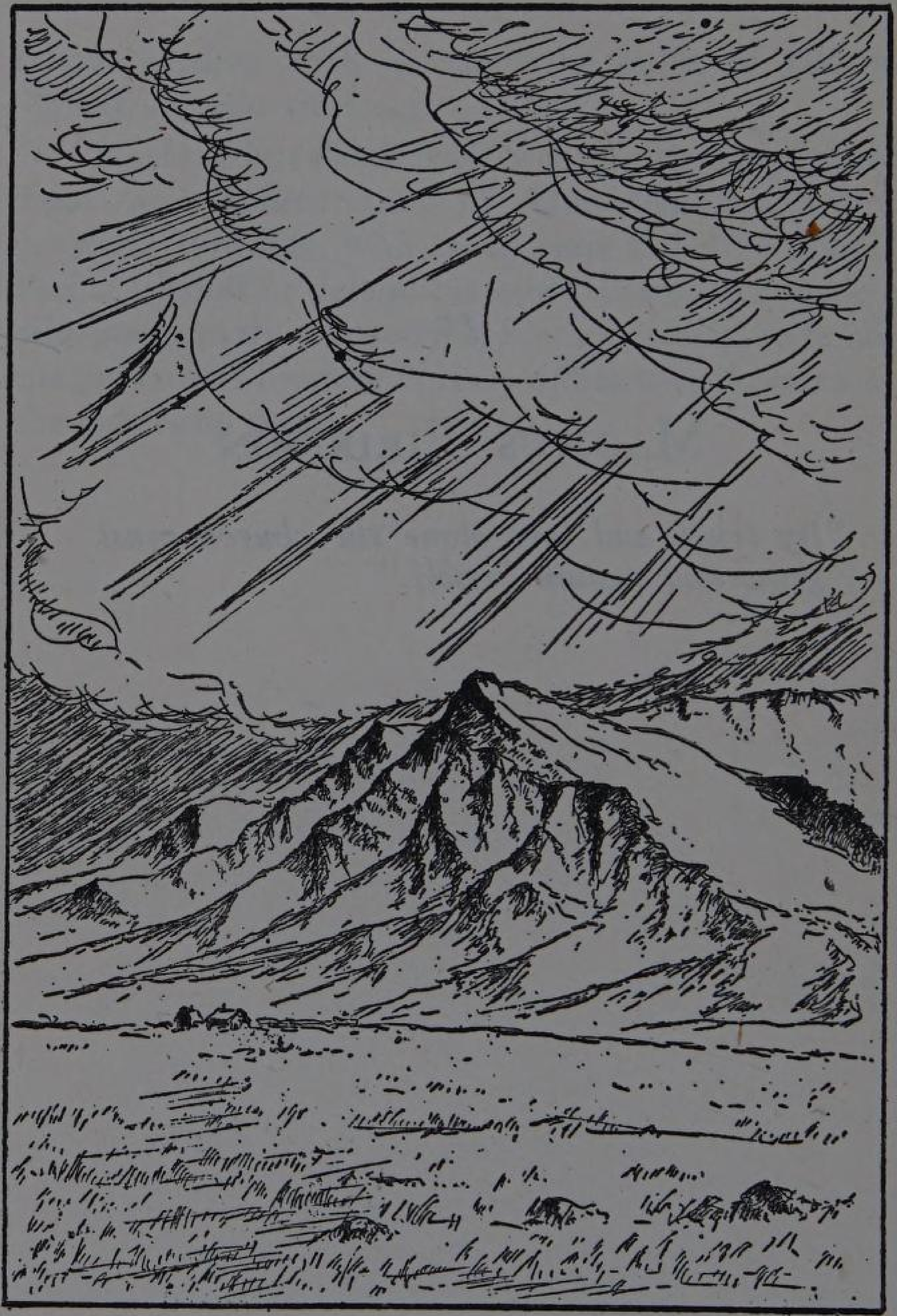
fellow idealists with an annoying habit of asking, "What are *you* working at today?"

Nothing but death itself was able to dissipate the vigor and consecration of Unitarianism's major prophet. Emerson, who at no time failed to uphold Parker's hands or defend his spirit, years later made a pilgrimage to the cemetery in Florence, Italy, to honor the grave of Theodore Parker, militant spokesman of the American people.

10

MAGNUS EIRIKSSON

"By truth and love alone the church must grow and sustain herself."



FROM THE LONELY FIELDS OF ICELAND

10

MAGNUS EIRIKSSON

"COPYRIGHTED in all languages including the Scandinavian." That little sentence has been written on the front pages of thousands of English and American books. What far fewer people know is that it applies ever more to liberal religion than to the printing of books. This brief survey of the men of liberty in our Unitarian cause includes the Scandinavian in the figure of Magnus Eiriksson, son of Iceland and stout pioneer of religious freedom for countless thousands. To the resourceful immigrants from Iceland now living along the shores of Lake Winnipeg or on the rolling wheatfields of Saskatchewan, or in the clean white clapboard cottages of British Columbia and the states of Washington and North Dakota, the name of Eiriksson rings out as does Servetus to a European or Channing to a man from Massachusetts.

The name of Eiriksson is wrapped in paradox. A native Icelander, he lived most of his life in Copenhagen, Denmark.[1] A Unitarian by dint of personal conviction and discovery, he lived and served among the Lutherans. A man prevented by church and university authorities from holding high positions, he became the voice of religious independence for succeeding generations in Iceland, in the other Scandinavian countries and far overseas. No account, however slight, of the advance of religious freedom can be written that leaves his name untold.

---

[1] In Eiriksson's time Iceland was a political part of the Kingdom of Denmark. Since 1918 Iceland has been a sovereign nation although subscribing allegiance to the Danish King. Hence in this chapter we see a close relationship between Iceland and Denmark.

Boldness in a Church

Magnus Eiriksson was a teacher of religion who was to our knowledge never burned in effigy, nor threatened with flames, nor endangered by the sword; yet his was a persecution few have tolerated without flinching — punishment by poverty and hunger for the exercise of an honest mind at work on truth. The most dramatic moment in his life came because of boldness in a church convention.

In the year 1871, a great conference of churchmen from Iceland, Denmark, Sweden and Norway was held in Copenhagen. The leaders of the Lutheran Church were gathered for a solemn conclave and discussion of their faith. The assembly hall of Copenhagen University was crowded to the doors. In the pulpit, looking down over the clergy in their robes of dignity and the lay people gathered to pay honor to the great men of their church, stood Bishop Grundtvig. In his impressive figure was represented with power the ultraconservative faith inherited from Luther: the belief that the essence of Christianity is to be found in the Lord's Prayer, the baptismal rite, the Apostle's Creed, the Lord's Supper. His mighty voice filled the sanctuary as it commanded priest and people to bind the ancient faith to their hearts with hoops of steel. With an eloquence known throughout the northern countries wherever the word of God was preached, he bade them beware of the unholy spirit of rationalism with its wicked confidence in human minds.

And then the second speaker rose, the slender figure of a gentle scholar known as Magnus Eiriksson. In him was symbolized all that the mighty Grundtvig feared: the spirit of the liberal mind, untamed, unbroken, and in quest of truth. A quiet like the hush before a hurricane fell upon the audience. The aging scholar mounted to the pulpit and lifted up his voice. His words were those that we have heard before in other languages — at Geneva, at Kolozsvar, in Birmingham and London, in Boston and Concord — the clear and unmistakable appeal for freedom. Eiriksson appealed before as hostile an audience as any preacher ever faced. He pleaded for independent reading of the Scriptures, for selection of truth from error in the creeds, for the listening to Jesus and his words instead of hollow recitation of the Apostolic Creed. He got no further in his speech. The hurricane broke out with dreadful fury. Ministers and laymen raised their voices in a babel of confusion. Eiriksson waited silently. At last the clergyman in charge restored the hall to order and invited the speaker to proceed.

"The dust of centuries has so covered the pure gold of original Christianity that it cannot be seen." Again pandemonium broke forth. Voices cried out, "We know what we have believed." Magnus Eiriksson made an effort to speak on: "The teaching of Christ has been relegated to the shade." The tumult burst into open shouting. The bishops in their canopied chairs arose to join the movement of the crowd around the rostrum. Professors of theology, with brilliant hoods around their shoulders, stamped from their pews and raised their hands in angry defiance of the speaker, crying: "Down with the blasphemer."

Seeing the hopelessness of further preaching, Eiriksson raised his arms in benediction and began a prayer: "Heavenly Father, to Thee I appeal my heartfelt cause. Let my words be considered by thy divine judgment and my heart and my conscience be judged by Thee. If I have been faithful according to the dictates of my conscience, then be thou my advocate and lead these people to the realization of the truth."

During the prayer there was utter silence in the church. As Eiriksson concluded and marched down the aisle a tall, blond giant in the robes of a Norwegian bishop stepped from the throng and embraced him, saying: "Your sincerity has overwhelmed me even though I loved my Savior most when you denied him thrice." Sitting far in the rear of the church, busy with pen and paper, sat a young minister from Iceland taking notes of all that was happening around him — the stirring crowd, the words of Eiriksson, the courageous salutation by the bishop from Norway. To this quiet delegate,[2] with his presence of mind and speeding pen, we owe the record of that great event, although this episode occurred in Denmark. No single incident in all Icelandic history better presents the boldness of the men born on that great island near the Arctic circle. While he sometimes asked for bread from those who loved him most, Eiriksson never asked for man's permission to proclaim the truth. This was his birthright from a race of men who hated compromise. Reminiscent of the statue of Servetus in Geneva, Switzerland, today a statue to Eiriksson stands in a great cemetery in Copenhagen, unless the hands of Nazi vandals have destroyed it as opposed to public interest in a "Nordic" world.

---

[2] Matthias Jochumsson. This man became the leading poet of Iceland and held that position for fifty years. He was also a minister in the State Church, although very liberal in his views. He was a Channing Unitarian and had a deep admiration for Channing. In a book of his letters which date from

What Do You Know About Iceland?

This is the sixty-four-dollar question[3] for most of us, and most of us would fail. For Iceland is far more than an island in the North Atlantic famous for the Althing (the ninth-century parliament set up by several clans to keep the peace and rule the land). It is more than a lava-covered glacial country, thin in soil, of sparse vegetation, and broken with fissures only

---

1861 to 1919 (Akureyri, Iceland: Bref, 1935) he refers to Channing repeatedly and always with the greatest admiration. Jochumsson was born in 1835 and died in 1920. In so high esteem was he held by his countrymen that his picture was placed on a special issue of postage stamps, the only Icelander so to be honored by his country. Amongst other things he composed the words to the Icelandic national anthem in 1874 on the occasion of the thousandth anniversary of the settlement of the island. He was a liberal in religion; he was also a poet and playwright of great ability and exerted a profound influence on the thinking of his nation for two generations.

[3] In the United States in 1943 radio quiz programs gained immense popularity with prizes for success at unrehearsed, impromptu questions on a great variety of subjects. The prize for one correct answer was $4, for two (by the same person) $8, for three $16, for four $32, for five $64. Few persons survived the ordeal of question number five.

recently bridged for motor cars and trucks. Most of us as schoolchildren learned that it has some eider ducks and polar bears. We all have heard of the boiling geysers and the co-operatives, the white foxes and deep-sea fishermen; but Iceland does not end with these phenomena. It also has a race of men in love with liberty of soul. They know the meaning of religious freedom. The Lutheran Bishop of Iceland to this day sends greetings by radiogram when Unitarian conferences are held in Winnipeg. The Lutheran University of Iceland not long ago invited a Unitarian to preach in Reykjavik. This is more important for history as it is written in our time than the geysers or the fishing banks. In this land of niggardly soil, the spirit grows more generous and the mind more bold.

The Life of Magnus Eiriksson

Magnus Eiriksson was born on an isolated farm in Iceland on June 21, 1806. As a boy he tended sheep and helped with the haying. Because of special talents of mind which appeared early in his life, his stepfather[4] sent him to a Latin school in Bessastad, from which he graduated at the age of twenty-three. Because of poverty he was unable to attend the University of Copenhagen in Denmark. Upon graduation he entered the service of the Governor of Iceland, a man named Krieger, as a government secretary. Two years later Governor Krieger made it possible for him to enter upon the study of theology at the University of Copenhagen, from which he graduated with high honors in 1837. Normally, high distinction in a theological graduate led to an appointment to one of the more prosperous parishes in the established church of Iceland. Eiriksson found no parish to his liking. These were days of dark reaction in the Lutheran Church. He preferred spiritual freedom. Heresy may have been already forming in his mind. Magnus Eiriksson began to tutor students at the University of Copenhagen. For years this was his only livelihood.

---

[4] His father died when Magnus was six. His mother soon remarried.

Meanwhile, the rule of Danish orthodoxy suffered from the shocks of distant revolutions in the world of thought. This was a century of change and growth within the churches on the continent of Europe, in England and America. Channing was preaching; Emerson was at work; the English Unitarians were winning victories in court and chapel.

The Baptists sent their missionaries into Denmark, and started winning followers within the Lutheran fold. The clergy was aroused; the magistrates were called and heavy fines were measured out, and not a few were left in prison for their zeal. Baptist property was confiscated and children separated from their parents. One voice, and that not Baptist, was raised in protest. It was that of Magnus Eiriksson, who wrote a pamphlet and took it to the printer. He defended the Baptist missionaries in their contention that Jesus had baptized adults only (a view now confirmed by biblical scholars). However, his chief protest was not one of scholarship but of religious freedom. It is improper, said Eiriksson, for a Christian church to win support by religious persecution. It is a sign of weakness and corruption to silence the voice of conscience by the use of law. "By truth and love alone the church must grow and sustain itself." This was the beginning of his jousting with the Danish Church.

He bent his mind to an examination of the bases of historic Christianity. Like Channing, he became a thorough and indefatigable student of Christian thought. Beginning with *Faith Fanaticism and Unbelief (Tro, Overtro og Vantro)*, Eiriksson proceeded to write ten books on the subject of scriptural criticism. An amazing portion of the material was original with him, though upon later examination it paralleled similar studies in liberal theological schools in Germany and the United States. His books, while disturbing beyond words to the Danish churchmen, were quickly translated into the other Scandinavian languages.

Meanwhile he committed a second sin in the eyes of the orthodox Lutherans of his time. He entered into political reforms. Eiriksson, as the first Unitarian in Scandinavia, resembled the early Unitarians in the United States. He saw personal religion and social responsibility as indissolubly related. The worth of man in the eyes of God compelled him to serve the cause of brotherhood of man with man on earth. Eighteen years before John Stuart Mill published his famous book on the freedom of women, Eiriksson published his *Letters to Clara Raphael (Breve til Clara Raphael)*, and in it used several of the arguments later used by Mill. His social purposes added fuel to the flames already kindled by his theological heresies. A whispering campaign in Copenhagen robbed him of his pupils. He was scorned in the streets as was his contemporary Theodore Parker walking on fashionable Beacon Hill in Boston. When he received an invitation to lecture in Sweden, his friends gathered a small sum to purchase a new suit of clothes for the occasion. Later the Bishop of Iceland, visiting in Denmark, shocked by the poverty of so great a man, offered Eiriksson a church in his home country, an offer which meant food and shelter, a pulpit and a people to be served. Yet, after careful weighing of the matter, Magnus Eiriksson refused, because he felt that with the sentiment of almost all the church against him he could not be within the church the effective reformer that he was outside its walls. It may seem obtuse on his part, as we view it now a century later and so far away, but knowing both his love of preaching true religion, and his insight concerning conditions in the church, we must conclude that he felt the chances for success within the church were slim indeed.

He became the most vilified minister in two countries — Iceland and Denmark. He was called by his detractors "Magnus, the serpent's tongue." One minister from Iceland cried: "The devil possess this anti-Christ. Where are the authorities that they do not burn this modern Arius as the men at Geneva burned Servetus?" Then, thinking he may have been too violent, or perhaps impolitic, he added: "At least his books could be burned and he himself banished for life." The King of Denmark, known as Christian VIII, ordered an indictment drawn up against Eiriksson, but the sovereign died before the order was carried out. Happily his successor, being a more liberal ruler, granted amnesty to all political and religious offenders.

While he was despised by the bishops (with noteworthy exceptions) and by the magistrates, Magnus was warmly loved by the common people, and especially by the students at the universities, who called him "Brother Magnus." As one forgotten student has recorded it for later generations: "To listen to him, or to read his books, after a trying day in the classrooms is like stepping out of a dungeon into sunlight." While evidence exists that some pious parents in Iceland and Denmark burned his books (an event we have come to consider fundamental to success in early Unitarianism), many students listened gladly to his words. Younger faculty members befriended him, both in Denmark and Sweden, and saw in him a tower of strength they often wished they might possess.

After the great convention described early in this chapter, Eiriksson decided to retire from public life. He did, however, write one of his greatest books before he died, *The Jews and the Christians,* a completely Unitarian statement, clear as sunlight, forthright and convincing to the open mind. In the work and teaching of the early Christian Jews he found the purest loyalty to Jesus and his message. After them, he contended, came false teachers with foreign distortions of the Gospel, beginning with the author of the Fourth Gospel which is known to us as the Gospel of John. When he had finished this great confession of his faith, Eiriksson was through. A weary man laid down his pen. Tardily the Danish government awarded him a modest pension, and to this was added a contribution gathered by his friends. As his strength failed, his heart rejoiced at the growing evidence that his liberal views had begun to take firm root in the University of Copenhagen as well as in the congregations of a growing group of churches in four northern countries. He died in Copenhagen June 3, 1881.

The Teaching of Eiriksson

To Magnus Eiriksson the most appalling fact in the religion of his time was the fatalism of the people, their dull acceptance of a faith which doomed so many men to darkness and despair. The docility of the poor, the arrogance of the rich, the sleek contentment of the clergy — these were the harsh, disturbing facts which stirred the soul of the young student from Iceland who read in his Gospels of a joyous teacher, a companion of the poor, a man who hated slavery of one man by another.

Elsewhere in the world was coming into power what we call today *the scientific spirit,* the use of reason in the quest for truth, cutting across the sentiments of men and testing theories by evidence, by rigorous experiment. This spirit entered into the mind of Eiriksson and never left it until his final breath. He applied the scientific method to the Bible, believing that its teachings could be tested by experience as well as by tradition, and be found to work in life today. About him in the Lutheran Church and universities he found men accepting faith on other grounds. *"Credo quia revelatum"* ("I believe because it is revealed"), said some. *"Credo ut intelligam"* ("I believe in order to understand"), said others. A third group went so far as to say *"Credo quia absurdum est"* ("I believe because it is absurd"), adding: "I plunge into this dark mystery as a man dives into the boundless sea of utter darkness."

Eiriksson reacted strongly to all of this Latin phrase-making which seemed a long distance from the simple wisdom of the Galilean teacher with his words of sympathy and understanding. To all of the *credo quias* of the Lutheran clergy, Eiriksson replied: "God dwells in the light of human intelligence, not in the sepulchral darkness of metaphysical dogmatism." "Where," he writes, "has God revealed himself if not in the human intelligence? How can a man gain his freedom (the truth that makes one free, mentioned in the gospels) if he believes only those things others have told him?" He then proceeded to an examination of historical Christianity. With firm tread he walked on to Unitarian ground.

> *"Christ did not regard himself as a divine being, for he speaks of himself as the son of man and seeks divine assistance in prayer just like any other human being. God could not be in need of prayer, and it is most illogical to think of God praying to himself."*

Eiriksson, without apparent foreign sources at his hand to aid him, concluded that verbal inspiration of the Bible was absurd. The idea of supernatural composition of the Scriptures prevailed then in Denmark as it still does today for millions of Americans. Rather, concluded Eiriksson, we see in the Bible the evolution of the Jewish faith, a progressive development of religion from lower to higher ideas about God and moral duty to our fellow men.

He moved on to the historic Christian creeds, and like Socinus and David, Biddle and Lindsey, he found them all to be the fruits of compromise in later centuries, not teachings from the lips of Jesus, nor ideas consistent with clear reason in the nineteenth century. What every student in a Unitarian theological school today takes as commonplace, Eiriksson proclaimed in all its burning novelty before the closed and hostile minds of men in Copenhagen University. "Reforms to be effective should be progressive." The Reformers, like Martin Luther, only made a beginning. His movement never grew to its fruition, because it became static soon after it started. It should have removed all *mediators*.[5] "The Christian teaching," said Eiriksson, "teaches a Father-son relationship, as is seen in the story of the Prodigal son. It is illogical and wicked to think of God as requiring repentance to find a welcome in the Father's house." God must not, said he, be portrayed as an exacting tyrant.

---

[5] Orthodox Christianity taught the idea of mediation between God and men. The mediator is a sacred man or object serving as a means of communication and of reconciliation. The idea of mediation assumes the wrath of God which simply does not exist. "God is love." That he ever feels wrath is to personalize God in the manner of primitive man where God is portrayed in man's image. The mediator may be a person (a priest), or a book (the Bible), or a sacrament (a supernatural rite like baptism). Whether these or other "mediators" are employed, the purpose remains constant — to make complex and subject to control the relationship between God and man.

The parallel of this portion of Eiriksson's writing with Channing's New York sermon on the immoral view of God held by the Calvinists is worth noting. Both men found the God of Jesus far removed from the demanding deity of the Lutherans and of the Calvinists, a God vindictive and calculating, indifferent to moral earnestness and unconcerned with brotherhood on earth. The whole idea of vicarious sacrifice found in the creeds (the idea that Jesus was a sacrifice for millions of sinful men, a sacrifice aimed to appease an angry God) seemed unethical to Eiriksson, as it did to Priestley and Parker and countless other Unitarians. "How," asked Magnus Eiriksson, "can men be asked to put their hope of salvation in so unreasonable a God as the Lutherans teach?"

The sharp and decisive words of Eiriksson first established a ground in Scandinavia for liberal thought in religion. To him later men, both within and outside the Lutheran Church, turned for spiritual support. From his time forward Unitarianism was a solid and recognizable position. With his testimony in the memory of men and his words so clear before their eyes, new spokesmen rose to carry on the banner furled when Magnus "fell on sleep."

The Beginnings of Icelandic Unitarianism

In modern wartime industries, in manufacturing synthetic rubber for example, chemists speak of all important *know-hows* — formulæ for manufacturing essential to success. Religion has its *know-hows* too: ideas earned by long experience, always being changed, improved, expanded, but effective in the task of living out our years with satisfaction and a sense of progress. Eiriksson gave to many after him the *know-how* of the liberal faith: confidence in the resourcefulness of man, his intelligence, his fundamental goodness, his solid comradeship with others of his kind and with his universe.

Copenhagen today has a Unitarian church, an even more significant memorial to Eiriksson's liberal faith than the monument previously mentioned. (He is the only Icelander honored with a statue in Copenhagen.) There is no other Unitarian church in Scandinavia.

There is no Unitarian church in Iceland. Recent elections, however, have made it quite clear that the State Church, nominally Lutheran, has a large number of theological liberals in its ranks. The pioneers of Unitarianism are known and honored there today.

The Icelandic people, with a great heritage of independence in religion, respect the right of private judgment so dear to the Unitarian mind. Paganism, Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism all are found in the past of this stalwart people, but one finds almost none of the inquisitions, heresy trials, tortures and fagots so frequently appearing in the history of religion in other lands.[6]

From his ancient Norse tradition the Icelander possesses a sense of dignity unsullied by any serfdom to a heavenly despot. Nowhere does the pagan faith of the Northmen speak of "the fear of God." Rather, the classic religion of the Icelander urges him to be a friend of the deities.[7]

---

[6] There was one outbreak of witch burning in Iceland in 1690, although it was proportionately less, and came sooner to an end, than elsewhere in the world. Altogether twenty-two men and one woman were burned during the period of witch hunting.

If space permitted, much could be written of such liberals as Gudbrandur Thorlaksson and Pall Vidalin[8] in the sixteenth century, and later Magnus Stephensen[9] in the eighteenth century — men who never lost sight of the ethical and rational elements in healthy religion. These men and their followers insisted upon the universality of religion and the evil of exclusive "revelations." Without using the name "Unitarian" they served the greater cause of spiritual liberty with complete devotion.

The University of Iceland, founded in 1911, which includes a Lutheran theological school, owes allegiance to no creeds, but rather in the words of its first president "is dedicated to the search after truth alone, in fearless anticipation of whither it may lead." Five ministers serving the State (Lutheran) Church in Iceland today served Unitarian pulpits in Canada.

---

[7] The late Dr. Rognvaldur Petursson of Winnipeg in his published lecture "The Development of Liberal Religion in Iceland" has noted this independence of his people in rejecting the feeling of sin and remorse characteristic of orthodox Christianity. He writes: "The 'fear of God,' essentially a Semitic or Oriental obsession, is an experience utterly unknown to the North. The same is true of the theological idea of imputed sin. It is only after the introduction of Christianity that this fear is inculcated and the feeling of sin aroused in the hearts of the faithful, but sustained only as long as a belief in a place of everlasting torment could be maintained. It is therefore not accidental that the Catholic Church and later Protestantism, one after the other, in every Northern country, has stressed unduly this doctrine of sin and retribution. This notion of friendship, mutual attachment and comradeship, subconsciously felt to exist between man and nature, the human and the divine, runs counter to the whole Christian scheme of Redemption."

[8] Thorlaksson (1542-1627) was Bishop of Iceland for fifty-six years and translated the Bible into Icelandic. Vidalin was a great scientist and made a geological survey of Iceland in the years 1702-1710.

[9] Magnus Stephensen (1762-1833) purged the old hymn books in Iceland of all references to the power of Satan and everlasting torment. Those references never reappeared.

The American Migration

In 1870 an Icelandic migration to America began. The first pioneers arrived in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Five years later other Icelanders found their way to Gimli, Manitoba. Before long sons of the northern island were in Minnesota, Saskatchewan, Nova Scotia, North Dakota, and a few years later their settlements were started on the Pacific Coast.

The spirit of Magnus Eiriksson in far-off Copenhagen traveled to the new land. As a reaction to extreme Lutheran orthodoxy preached to the migrating Icelanders, a small company of liberal men and women organized a debating society in Mountain, North Dakota, in 1886. Two years later The Icelandic Ethical Culture Society was started at Gardar, North Dakota. One of the strong leaders of these first religious societies among Icelanders was Bjorn Petursson, a former member of the Icelandic Parliament. Petursson's friendship with the Reverend Kristofer Janson, a liberal Norwegian writer, brought him in touch with Unitarian churches in Minnesota and other midwestern states. In February, 1891, Bjorn Petursson and Jon Olafsson, editor of the Icelandic newspaper, *Heimskringla,* founded the First Icelandic Unitarian Church of Winnipeg, Manitoba. Early in the twentieth century Icelandic Unitarian churches were organized at Gimli, Lundar, Oak Point, Arnes, Arborg, Riverton, Piney, and Wynyard.

Today no group of living Unitarians more ardently supports the Unitarian faith than the spiritual descendants of "Brother Magnus," self-exiled hero of Iceland, uncompromising servant of liberal religion in every language. As the Constitution of Iceland gives absolute religious freedom to every citizen, so the first, second and third generation Icelanders along the shores of cold Lake Winnipeg, and over the fertile Canadian plains, teach their fair-haired children the imperishable values of rational religion.

A New Opportunity for Religion

From Servetus to Eiriksson, the liberal gospel of the free mind and conscience has been traced in lives of heroic men. The responsibility to translate it into a new world of a United Nations is our particular task in the second half of the twentieth century.

As we begin to have new and broader understanding of religion, as more nations, like the U.S.S.R. and Mexico, write religious freedom into their general laws, the giant figures of earlier religious liberals seem more eloquent in their challenge to us. In many denominations of Christendom and in many world religions forces are working mightily for a new unity of mankind. The opportunities for a liberal faith for free men were never greater than in this period of intercontinental struggle against tyranny of body and soul. The words of the ancient prophecy of Joel ring in our ears with special meaning: —

Put ye in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe.

BX9867 .F7
Fritchman, Stephen H. (Stephen Hole), 1
Men of liberty : ten Unitarian pioneers

BX
9867
F7

Fritchman, Stephen Hole, 1902–

Men of liberty; ten Unitarian pioneers, by Stephen Hole Fritchman, with illustrations by Hendrik Willem Van Loon. Boston, The Beacon press, 1945 [c1944]

xi, 180 p. front., illus. 20½ᶜᵐ.

CONTENTS.—Michael Servetus.—Faustus Socinus.—Francis David.—John Biddle. — Joseph Priestley.—Thomas Jefferson. — William Ellery Channing.—Ralph Waldo Emerson.—Theodore Parker.—Magnus Eiriksson.

1. Unitarian churches—Biog. I. Van Loon, Hendrik Willem, 1882-1944, illus. II. Title.

44-5181

Library of Congress BX9867.F7

332755 CCSC/sz